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Anwar Ibrahim Hobrom

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The Dissertation Committee for Anwar Ibrahim Hobrom certifies that this is
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ONLINE RESOURCES AND LEARNER AUTONOMY:
A STUDY OF COLLEGE-LEVEL STUDENTS OF
ARABIC

Committee:

Elaine Horwitz, Co-Supervisor

Paul Resta, Co-Supervisor

Jerry Bump

Zena Moore

Diane Schallert

ONLINE RESOURCES AND LEARNER AUTONOMY:
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ARABIC

Anwar Ibrahim Hobrom, B.A., M. A.

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DEDICATION

To my parents: The dream has finally come true.

To my wife: You are my true reward.

To my sons: Always believe.

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During my journey to fulfill a lifelong dream, so many persons have helped me with guidance, advice, and support. I would like to start my acknowledgements by thanking my mentor, graduate advisor, and dissertation co-supervisor, Professor Elaine Horwitz. Dr. Horwitz has supported me since I first met her. She inspired me in her classes with her knowledge and eloquent presentation. She always gave me advice on what my next step would be. And she saw to it that this project see the light in a professional manner. Her dedication and enthusiasm are unmatched.

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ONLINE RESOURCES AND LEARNER AUTONOMY: A STUDY OF COLLEGE-LEVEL STUDENTS OF ARABIC

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Co-supervisor: Elaine Horwitz
Co-supervisor: Paul Resta

This is a study about online resources and learner autonomy for college-level students of Arabic. The three research questions guiding this study were: How do college-level learners of Arabic perceive themselves as autonomous learners? What is the value of online resources as a learning aid for the autonomous language learner? What are the inherent features in online resources that empower the autonomous language learner? The sample for this descriptive study consisted of five second-semester students of Arabic at a major university in the U.S. Data were collected through interviews with the participants and their instructor as well as documents such as written journals and class syllabi. The participants were asked to express their views on autonomy, online resources, and how they might have been empowered by using such resources in their language learning experience. The findings suggested

that the participants perceived themselves as autonomous learners in two ways. One had to do with such characteristics as taking more responsibility, being more motivated, etc. The other was about them as learners such as improvement in their skills and being able to evaluate themselves. The findings also indicated that the participants appreciated the opportunity to practice their language skills interactively, especially speaking and listening, at their convenience and without feeling embarrassed in front of the instructor or their classmates. Finally, it was found that having many multimedia-type materials online made the learning experience interesting, engaging, and exciting for the participants.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

There is a perceived relationship between technology and learner autonomy in the language teaching community. Learner empowerment is a prominent feature of integrating the technology of online resources in a foreign language curriculum. Students are seen as becoming increasingly empowered when using such technology because they develop self-discipline and confidence through increased responsibility for their own learning processes (Warschauer, Turbee, and Roberts, 1994). Benson and Voller (1997) discussed these issues stating that “Computer software for language learning is an example of a technology which claims to promote autonomy simply by offering the possibility of self-study. Such claims are often dubious because of the limited range of options and roles offered to the learner” (p. 10). Benson and Voller go on to argue that all educational technologies including the textbook and the computer can be perceived to be more or less supportive of autonomy.

Computers have often been viewed as the perfect independent learning tool rather than simply a part of the autonomy/independence bigger picture. Why is that, and can technology really offer learners something unobtainable by other means? It could be argued that online resources are the ultimate engine for language learning. They offer volumes of text, pictures, sound, and video. They are also interactive and

increasingly offer ready made self-access materials available at any time and place for individual or collective learners.

1.2. Defining learner autonomy

Autonomy has been described as “a *capacity* - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts” (Little, 1991, p. 4). When the instructor’s role is examined within a certain educational setting, it would indicate whether a particular teacher tends to control the behavior of students or support their autonomy (Deci et al., 1981). Some other terms such as ‘self-access,’ ‘independent learning,’ ‘open,’ ‘distance,’ and ‘flexible’ learning have often been used to describe similar activities in which the teacher has more or less input in what goes on in the classroom. (The bottom line in all these uses is that teachers are encouraged to turn some power over to the learners and simultaneously take such roles as bystander, facilitator, guide, or helper.) One should be cautious, however, not to assume that all individuals are equally receptive to the notions of autonomous/independent learning.

1.3. The learner autonomy picture

There are four players in the learner autonomy picture: the learner, the teacher, the materials, and learning the context. Here is a look at each one of them in detail.

1.3.1. The learner

Obviously, autonomous learners are perceived to possess unique characteristics that make them independent, self-efficient, and willing to take the risk and responsibility of relying more on themselves than on others. Dickinson (1993) identifies five characteristics of independent learners:

1. *they understand what is being taught, i.e. they have sufficient understanding of language learning to understand the purpose of pedagogical choices;*
2. *they are able to formulate their own learning objectives;*
3. *they are able to select and make use of appropriate learning strategies;*
4. *they are able to monitor their use of these strategies;*
5. *they are able to self-assess, or monitor their own learning (Dickinson, 1993, pp. 330-31).*

1.3.2. The teacher

A variety of new roles have been proposed for teachers to play in autonomous or independent learning. These roles include bystander, facilitator, guide, helper, counselor, and mentor. For example, an activity in which the instructor's role is to monitor the students' activities in pairs or small groups discreetly could be introduced to encourage learner autonomy. In such case, intervention is unnecessary unless learners need assistance. However, some teachers find these changes to be challenging and do not necessarily accept these new ideas easily. This is also a mistake that is commonly made in materials design for independent learning.

1.3.3. The materials

Designing suitable materials for the autonomous learner can be a challenge. Motteram (1997) wrote about the many years teachers spend developing materials for their classrooms and adapting their teaching styles to that environment. He wrote that when teachers switch to an independent learning environment, they might expect the immediate transferability of the previous skills to the new learner-centered environment. This never happens because the nature of independent learning materials is different. Consequently, teachers may feel threatened that they have lost the value of their hard earned skills. Motteram added that many learners will feel cheated if they find that the material they are presented with in a so-called independent learning environment is the same as that presented in a regular class.

1.3.4. Learning the context

Individuals are unique and their uniqueness should be emphasized because of their sociocultural background and the significance of allowing social reality to be a part of classroom teaching and learning. Social reality is not stable and because learners influence it, teachers cannot teach everything about a language. Learners influence the social context and the language in turn, or at least its use. For this reason, learners become more important members of a classroom. Therefore, classroom learning should take learners' backgrounds into account in order to provide a meaningful and stimulating learning environment. This view of social reality is consistent with the constructivist movement in cognitive psychology, which posits

that individuals gradually build their own understanding of the world through experience and maturation (Bruner, 1986).

Benson (1997, p.1-2) notes that the term *learner autonomy* can have at least five different connotations:

- a. *for situations in which learners study entirely on their own*
- b. *for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning*
- c. *for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education*
- d. *for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning*
- e. *for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning* (Benson, 1997, pp. 1-2).

We often hear the term *self-direction* in connection with learner autonomy. This term refers to the type of learning that occurs when the learner makes a decision regarding the setting and content of the learned subject matter. While this could happen unconsciously, other learners consider self-directed learning as a conscious form of learning, thereby equating it with autonomous learning (Hammond & Collins, 1991).

In sum, autonomy is a social construct that includes the ability to function effectively as a cooperative member in a group. Learning takes place in a social context and it is this context that learners have to be aware of and assume a role in.

1.4. Open issues in language learner autonomy research

The line of language learner autonomy research has many open questions that need to be addressed to optimally utilize this modern technology of online resources and incorporate it into foreign language programs that cater to autonomous learners. Below are key issues worthy of investigation by researchers in this field.

1.4.1. The learner's perspective versus the teacher's perspective

It is important to examine the learner's viewpoint regarding how effective autonomous learning is. At the other end of this process is the teacher whose input is equally significant to judge the success of learner autonomy in such a technology-rich environment. LoCastro (2001) stated that

studies based only on a quantitative approach have not taken the field beyond what is already known. Research adopting qualitative techniques or a multi-dimensional methodology may generate insights into language learning closer to learners' views and interpretations. Emphasis needs to be placed on obtaining individual learners' accounts with as little interference as possible from the researcher and the methods used to elicit them (LoCastro, 2001, p. 73).

1.4.2. The effect of multimedia instruction on student perceptions

Another open issue in learner autonomy worthy of more research is the effect of multimedia instruction on student perceptions and the relationship between such perceptions and the actual achievement of specific skills (Stepp-Greany, 2002). Studying this aspect would contribute to our knowledge base and help shape and improve technology-enhanced curriculum and instruction. It is also hoped that further research in this topic confirms the prediction that foreign language learners exposed

to this learning tool would become lifelong learners of the foreign language beyond the classroom context (González-Bueno, 1998).

1.4.3. How college-level learners of Arabic perceive themselves as autonomous learners

Because the literature of learners of Arabic is thin, this study targets learners of Arabic as a foreign language at a major college program hoping to fill a gap in the literature and contribute to our knowledge about how learners of the less commonly taught languages, in general, and Arabic, in particular, perceive themselves as autonomous learners.

Because of the diglossia phenomenon (having more than one form of the language in current use), teachers of Arabic as a foreign language have often struggled with what to teach their students and how to teach them. This study will hopefully help teachers of Arabic as a foreign language identify some autonomy characteristics in their students and make it easier for the teachers to know more about how to teach them.

1.4.4. What students want in an online environment

The idea of a learner-centered environment is still unfamiliar to many students who grew up in a teacher-centered classroom. Asking those learners to suddenly shift to a new setting that is totally or partially electronic might lead to a shock and great resistance. In order to ensure a smooth transition to a new reality, students should be

asked what they want in the new environment. If adapting to a technologically-enhanced classroom is inevitable in this era, researchers, curriculum designers, administrators, and teachers should obtain the students' feedback on what features of online resources appeal to them and are most helpful in their education. In addition, we know very little about how students actually use online resources. Students may not use the resources in the ways that the teachers had envisioned.

1.5. Purpose of the study

Given all the open issues in language learner autonomy mentioned earlier, this study focuses on specific questions of interest to the author. First, this is an exploratory descriptive study that examines the theoretical construct of autonomy in language learning. Because this is a very broad area, the focus is on the role of learner autonomy in making use of online resources when studying Arabic, one of the less commonly taught languages.

This study attempts to explore how online resources are used as a tool to enhance autonomy in learning Arabic. It further examines whether the students' behavior changes as a result of exposing them to online resources in their language learning curriculum. Most importantly, this study tries to underscore the ways in which autonomy is manifested, facilitated, or encouraged.

This paper will examine how online resources can be utilized to foster autonomy when learning Arabic as a foreign language in a formal setting. As a result of introducing this new technology in recent language programs, a shift from a

teaching environment to a learning environment in which students are taught through the Internet to become lifelong learners has resulted (Berge & Collins, 1995). In other words, the focus in language learning is shifting from the teacher to the learner.

The population for this study consists of learners of Arabic at a college level. The sample is comprised of five second semester students of Arabic at a major university in the southwest. The five participants were part of an intact group that included seventeen students from one class.

1.6. Research questions

The three research questions guiding this study are:

- How do college-level learners of Arabic perceive themselves as autonomous learners?
- What is the value of online resources as a learning aid for the autonomous language learner?
- What are the inherent features in online resources that empower the autonomous language learner?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

With their potential to incorporate multimedia, online resources, especially the World Wide Web, have become very popular among both students and teachers. This section will seek to find out how previous language studies on using online resources in a formal setting explored the topic.

2.1. Review outline

- The advantages of using online resources as an educational tool in language programs
- The disadvantages of online resources as an educational tool in language programs
- The educational applications of online resources in language programs: communication and research
- Language students' attitudes toward and perceptions of online resources
- The relationship between using online resources and enhancing the learning of language skills
- Fostering autonomy in language learning through using online resources
- Conclusion

2.2. The advantages of using online resources as an educational tool in language programs

Much of the published research on this topic shows that the advantages of using online resources as an educational tool far outweigh the disadvantages. Several researchers have mentioned many advantages. For example, according to Berge and Collins (1995), many opportunities are offered through online learning for such endeavors as course management, information retrieval, peer review, project-based instruction, personal networking, mentoring/tutoring, interactive chat, professional growth, and experience in using modern technology. Berge and Collins added that by writing online for an authentic purpose, students are motivated to communicate with a broader audience than what they are used to- the classroom.

In addition, the digital revolution of the late 20th and early 21st has shifted the focus in the classroom from the teacher to the learner. In the new environment students are helped through online learning to find the necessary resources to carry on their learning outside the classroom and thus become lifelong learners (ibid.).

Interaction was also discussed by many researchers. For example, Vilmi (1995) said that cultural awareness among students in different parts of the world is enhanced by the opportunities for interaction offered by online resources. Moreover, in searching for and retrieving information online, students have greater interaction with the course materials, providing them with a sense of ownership (Shetzer, 1995), as well as enjoyment of the course content (Opp-Beckman, 1995). In discussing the interaction of text and context, Kramsch and Andersen (1999, p. 31) said that using

multimedia technology in teaching languages presents a double challenge for learners to observe and select “culturally relevant features of the context” and put linguistic features in context to understand language in use.

The kinds of reflectiveness and interactivity that are mediated through asynchronous conferencing have also been researched. Lamy and Goodfellow (1999) concluded in their study of French learners that such an environment has “created the possibility for learners to interact with each other and with teachers and native speakers--thus providing opportunities for practice and intrinsic feedback” (p. 43). Lamy and Goodfellow go on to argue that conscious reflection is still necessary even in such an interactive learning environment and that it should be combined with spontaneous interaction.

In another study about computer mediated communication, Blake (2000), in a study on L2 Spanish interlanguage, found that “CMC can provide many of the alleged benefits ascribed to the Interaction Hypothesis” (p. 120), which states that the conditions for SLA are crucially enhanced by having L2 learners negotiate meaning (i.e., resolve their miscommunications) with other speakers, native or otherwise (Long & Robinson, 1998), but with more possibilities for access out of the classroom. Blake added that “incidental negotiations commonly occurred in networked learner/learner discussions as well, especially with respect to their lexical confusions” (p.120). Blake’s study showed “the value of synchronous chat records as a window for investigating interlanguage” (p.120).

Computer-assisted classroom discussion using networked computers was the topic of Healy Beauvois' (1992) dissertation. In her study, she explored the "interaction intermediate French students using a Local Area Network (LAN) for synchronous classroom discussion in French" (p. v). The findings suggested that student contributions in French fit "sound language learning pedagogy" (ibid.) where codeswitching and teacher intervention instances were low, whereas discourse was high in both quantity and quality, and students responded positively to this means of communication.

Moreover, the effects of the communication context of synchronous interaction tools, such as Web chat between English non-native and English native speakers, on the process of acquiring a second language was studied by Negretti (1999). The main purpose of the author was to discover "patterns and conversational strategies used by participants in this on-line context" (p. 75) as well as "the machinery and the structure of social action in language" (ibid.). The study also analyzed whether Web chat implied a "reduction of the range in interactional practices, actions performance, sense making, and meaning negotiation, thus affecting the SLA process" (ibid.). The analysis focused on "the overall structure of interaction and sequence organization in connection with the on-line communication setting features" (ibid.). It then passed to "turn-taking organization, with attention to recurrent structures and patterns as in openings and closings; turn design (or packaging of actions); expression of paralinguistic features in this on-line context; and some (interlanguage) pragmatic variables" (ibid.).

Computer-mediated communication was also studied by Sengupta (2001) who stated that it can be “a powerful tool towards literacy development as its text-based nature supports sustained reflection on classroom exchanges” (p. 103). Sengupta’s described how students completing a BA in Contemporary English Language used “the available technology to interact with peers and their comment on how this mode of delivery extended their traditional notions of learning” (ibid.). Sengupta’s data showed that the students were personally accountable due to their elevated exposure online- an issue viewed as an exceptional but intimidating part of this approach. This study evaluated how powerful online exposure can be in showcasing the students’ experiences and comments.

Collaborative Internet projects were studied by the EFL study of Braunstein et al. (2000). It was found that those projects provided “students with opportunities for completing authentic reading and writing tasks, for learning about other cultures, and for developing useful technical skills” (p. 1).

In a paper examining “the two tenets of communicative language teaching-- authenticity of the input and authorship of the language user--in an electronic environment” (p. 78), Kramsch et al. (2000) concluded, in their study of Spanish and English, that “a communicative approach based on the use of authentic texts and on the desire to make the learners author their own words has been changed by the physical properties of the electronic medium and the students' engagement with it” (ibid., p. 78).

Learner empowerment is another feature of integrating online resources in a foreign language curriculum. Students become empowered as they develop self-discipline and confidence by being more responsible for their own learning processes (Warschauer, Turbee, and Roberts, 1994). In addition, students are judged by their production, not what their appearance or how they sound, thus making them more confident when communicating in the target language.

Online learning can provide students with new, exciting, and challenging resources (Barron and Ivers, 1998). It creates opportunities for multicultural education, establishes authentic learning experiences, supports higher-order thinking skills, improves writing skills, and boosts motivation, achievement, and positive behavior.

Reading and writing skills are promoted through electronic discussion lists, e-mail keypals, and projects online by providing an authentic audience for students' writing (Gaer, 1999). In addition to having the flexibility to be used with students at any grade level and any proficiency level, these projects also help students develop computer literacy and online skills as they use the computer for authentic purposes.

Online resources also provide an excellent language learning environment especially for the autonomous learner. This environment was described in Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith (1999) and it listed eight conditions including opportunities for interaction with an authentic audience to perform authentic tasks, encouraging learners to be creative, providing enough time and feedback for learners, guiding

learners to be fully attentive during the learning process, having an ideal level of stress and anxiety, and supporting learner autonomy.

2.3. The disadvantages of online resources as an educational tool in language programs

As with any teaching tool, along with the benefits come some drawbacks as well. A challenge facing teachers is the time requirements in learning new ways to give feedback online, teaching software programs to students (Opp-Beckman, 1995), and facilitating and participating in online projects which are just getting started (Vilmi, 1995). Shetzer (1995) also warned that the interaction between the student and text (or computer) might overwhelm that among students themselves.

Learning and teaching online require great tolerance of ambiguity and even of chaos (Warschauer, Turbee and Roberts, 1994). In addition, students with low proficiency in keyboarding, reading and writing might find it difficult to remain motivated, perceiving the virtual classroom as a hindrance to learning more than a benefit (Hiltz, 1990).

Learning online was not designed to be, and is not, a complete language learning tool; it is merely one of many ways that we can learn and practice a foreign language. In particular, the material available on the Internet, with the exception of material produced for language learners, is not graded. Beginning students can easily be overwhelmed with the rich vocabulary and colloquial expressions that they find

there. It is therefore an important task for instructors to guide students to material that not only is of interest to them, but also manageable at their current level of language proficiency.

Using online resources is not one thing with narrow, uniform, and readily predictable outcomes. In practice, it is many things with many possible outcomes for different students. Furthermore, even a single category of using online resources, such as using them as an information archive, can produce tremendous variation in likely consequences. Schofield and Davidson (2002) looked at six kinds of outcomes of use of online resources that students experienced:

enhanced enjoyment and motivation, a better understanding of both computing and the Internet, a greater ability to produce work of quality, more access to career information and opportunities, exposure to a broader range of perspectives and experiences, and improved reading skills in both English and foreign languages (Schofield and Davidson 2002, p. 209).

As a result of the widespread effects of technology throughout the world, college-level educators are being challenged to rethink and revise their approaches and goals in teaching in order to effectively prepare students for what will be expected of them in the real world. Black et al. (1995) summarized the importance of using computers as educational tools because students like working on them and are motivated by the use of real data and the fact that this is a skill they will need in the future. Because the way in which we retrieve and interpret information is changing and evolving, so must the education which prepares students to successfully accomplish these tasks.

2.4. The educational applications of online resources in language programs: communication and research

According to Barron and Ivers (1998), the educational applications of online resources can be divided into two very broad areas: communication and research. The communication category includes asynchronous communications such as e-mail and electronic publishing, and synchronous communications such as chat rooms, audio conferencing, and video conferencing. The research category includes basic, advanced, and original research. Basic research involves finding, comparing, and reporting facts from one or more preselected sources. Advanced research includes a wider variety of sources such as several online sites in addition to print or CD-ROM sources. Another difference is that the sources are not preselected. Original research can be done using surveys and collaborative experiments. After the information is compiled, it can be graphed, analyzed, and reported.

Online resources can connect the teaching and learning of languages as described in Shetzer and Warschauer (2001) who wrote that learners should be taught the type of language that they would eventually use and that the language learner's motivation increases if there is informational content being taught. They added that in order for teaching to be effective, prior knowledge, existing knowledge, the total academic environment, and learners' linguistic proficiencies should be taken into consideration and that that contextualized language use should be the focus of language teaching. Finally, they wrote that what benefits learners most is a focus on significant and relevant content.

2.5. Language students' attitudes toward and perceptions of online resources

As to the attitudes of L2 learners toward the use of technology, Yang (2001), in a study about EFL students, reported that the experience was generally positive for learners. On the other hand, negative attitudes had to do with technical difficulties and information overload. Yang also reported that using online resources often stimulated incidental learning and that seeking information online triggered both anxiety and excitement in learners at the same time. In concluding the study, Yang stated that computer networks could empower students especially in well-designed language learning environments and that providing scaffolding to guide learners in using online applications and orient them to the task is essential for the success in implementing and integrating technology into the curriculum.

Researchers also studied student perceptions. In an important article, Stepp-Greany (2002) presented survey data from beginning Spanish classes using a combination of technologies: Internet activities, CD-ROM, electronic pen pals, and threaded discussions. Goals of the study were to determine students' perceptions of (a) the role and importance of the instructor in technology-enhanced language learning (TELL), (b) the accessibility and relevance of the lab and the individual technological components in student learning, and (c) the effects of the technology on the foreign language learning experiences. Students attributed an important role to instructors and perceived that cultural knowledge, listening and reading skills, and

independent learning skills were enhanced but were divided in their perceptions about the learning or interest values of the individual components.

In addition, Kung and Chuo (2002) investigated the potential role of ESL/EFL Web sites as a means to supplement in-class instruction. They evaluated a program in which forty-nine students enrolled in a high-beginner EFL class were introduced to five Web sites and instructed to use them for a homework assignment and for self-study. The data revealed that despite some difficulties encountered, students had an overall positive attitude to using the teacher-selected Web sites in their learning of English. The students found that learning English through ESL/EFL Web sites was interesting and that the teaching strategies used by the teachers were effective and necessary.

2.6. The relationship between using online resources and enhancing the learning of language skills

Many researchers have studied the relationship between using online resources and enhancing the learning of language skills. This line of research has established a high correlation between using this technology in the language classroom and high achievement in language proficiency.

In the reading comprehension area, for example, Lomicka (1998) wrote about “how computerized reading with full glossing may promote a deeper level of text comprehension” (p. 41) for students of French. Moreover, reading comprehension practice and production practice in Japanese were studied by Nagata (1998) who

investigated input versus output practice in educational software for second language acquisition. In addition, De Ridder (2002) found that when reading a text with highlighted hyperlinks, her subjects, native Dutch speakers learning French, were

significantly more willing to consult the gloss. However, this increased clicking does not slow down the reading process, does not affect text comprehension, and does not increase the vocabulary learned incidentally. The reading task does not seem to alter the clicking behaviour of the students but seems to influence the reader's vocabulary learning: A content-oriented reading task decreases the reader's attention for vocabulary (De Ridder, 2002, p. 123).

With regard to grammar, Collentine (2000), studying foreign-language learners of Spanish, demonstrated “how computer-assisted language learning (CALL) software containing user-behavior tracking technologies can provide important insights into the construction of grammatical knowledge” (p. 44). This satisfies the constructivist premises that are increasingly compelling teachers to employ exploratory and inductive tasks, stipulating that students should be "agents" who manufacture rather than receive knowledge.

Sotillo (2000) investigated “discourse functions and syntactic complexity in ESL learner output obtained via two different modes of computer mediated communication: asynchronous and synchronous discussions” (p. 82). The results showed that

asynchronous and synchronous CMC have different discourse features which may be exploited for different pedagogical purposes. In the hands of experienced teachers, both modes of CMC can be used as novel tools to enhance the language acquisition process by encouraging interaction among participants, collaborative text

construction, and the formation of electronic communities of learners (Sotillo, 2000, p. 82).

Hoven (1999) proposed an “instructional design model appropriate for humanistic multimedia Computer-Enhanced Language Learning (CELL) in a self-access environment for second language learning through listening and viewing comprehension” (p. 88). Hoven’s model was “grounded in sociocultural theory, and set against a background of research into the complexities of listening and viewing, individual learner differences and learning styles, characteristics of self-directed and autonomous learning, and user-friendly instructional software design” (ibid.).

Several researchers also highlighted the use of e-mail to promote foreign language learning in general and the writing skill in particular. When compared with oral production, L2 use generated through the electronic medium has several features according to González-Bueno (1998), who studied Spanish students. Those features are: “(a) greater amount of language; (b) more variety of topics and language functions; (c) higher level of language accuracy; (d) more student-initiated interactions; and (e) more personal and expressive language use” (p. 55).

However, Biesenbach-Lucas and Weasenforth (2001) questioned the potential of electronic mail writing in improving academic writing abilities for ESL students because email engenders features of both the written and spoken forms of the language. In a comparative study, there were no obvious differences found between students’ electronic mail and word-processed writing. However, the electronic mail texts were significantly shorter than the word-processed texts, and text-initial

contextualization was more prominent in the word-processed than in the electronic mail texts. (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2001).

Other researchers were interested in investigating how the online resources would help in teaching culture. Osuna and Meskill (1998), for instance, concluded that the online environment was a suitable tool to increase language and cultural knowledge of Spanish, as well as a means to increase motivation. Furstenberg et al. (2001) presented a “Web-based, cross-cultural, curricular initiative entitled *Cultura*, designed to develop foreign language students’ understanding of foreign cultural attitudes, concepts, beliefs, and ways of interacting and looking at the world” (p. 55). The participants were French and American students, and the focus was on the “pedagogy of electronic media, with particular emphasis on the ways in which the Web can be used to reveal those invisible aspects of a foreign culture, thereby giving a voice to the elusive *silent language* and empowering students to construct their own approach to cross-cultural literacy” (ibid.).

In another culture-related study, Müller-Hartmann (2000) compared three e-mail projects between EFL high school classes in Germany, and English and Social Studies classes in the United States and Canada. The researcher concluded that

A comparison between intercultural learning in the actual reading process and the negotiation of meaning in the network phases shows a close resemblance in the structure and use of tasks. Task properties, such as activity, setting, and teacher and learner roles, as well as the personal level (i.e., non-thematic exchange of information) in the asynchronous e-mail exchange, proved to be especially influential for intercultural learning in the design and management of task structure (Müller-Hartmann, 2000, p. 129).

In testing, Roever (2001) argued that “Web-based language tests were most appropriate in low-stakes testing situations; but with proper supervision, they can also be used in medium-stakes situations although they are not generally recommended for high-stakes situations” (p. 84).

Perez Fernandez (2000) examined how the use of the World Wide Web (WWW) as a tool may change the contents as well as the teaching procedures and the material covered. In class he used the WWW as a source of authentic material for the study of English in the field of psychology. His students had “access to current on-line material, and they can work with such diverse web sites as departments of psychology web sites, on-line atlases of the brain, resource web sites, career orientation and professional information web sites, etc.” (p. 257). He reported that the students became proficient in English and acquainted with vocabulary related to their main discipline, i.e. psychology. Perez Fernandez reported that the result was more dynamic approach to teaching English, so that the students gain autonomy, with the instructor acting only as coordinator, supervisor and tutor (ibid.).

In another study on English for construction, Perez Fernandez (2001), studied the potential of the WWW to expand the possibilities of language teaching, particularly in the field of specific content areas, like engineering, architecture or the construction industry. He found that the Web facilitated “easy, instantaneous access to sources of information, specialized texts and data that were either unavailable in the past or took a considerable amount of time to access” (p. 119). He suggested that “in addition to providing these specific texts that can be used as teaching and practice

material, and serving as an electronic board with information on classes, deadlines, contents, syllabus, etc., the WWW should also affect the way languages are taught, as well as the learning styles of the students” (ibid.). Perez Fernandez concluded that because online resources are being increasingly used as a teaching resource, “we should move from a phase of simply using the new media with the old content, on to developing not only new contents but also new teaching procedures and strategies based on these new media” (ibid.).

This line of research still has a number of open questions about how to optimally utilize this modern technology and incorporate it into foreign language programs. LoCastro (2001), for example, recommended that this area especially needed more qualitative or multi-dimensional research learn more about learners' perceptions of the incorporation of online resources. She further suggested that future studies focus on individual learners' accounts without interference from the researcher. Moreover, Stepp-Greany (2002) concluded that more research is needed on student perceptions of multimedia instruction and the teacher's role in such environments. It is also hoped that further research in this topic confirms the prediction that foreign language learners exposed to this learning tool would become lifelong learners of the foreign language beyond the classroom context (González-Bueno, 1998).

2.7. Fostering autonomy in language learning through using online resources

Technology-based approaches to autonomy development are similar in many areas to other resource-based approaches, but can be differentiated from them through their focus on the technologies used to access resources (Benson, 2001). As Motteram (1997) points out, new learning technologies have a long association with autonomy. Many technology-based projects have been reported incorporating student-produced video (Gardner, 1994), computer-enhanced interactive video (Gardner and Blasco-Garcia, 1996), electronic writing environments (Milton, 1997), concordancing (Aston, 1997), hypermedia systems (Mayes, 1994), e-mail language advising (Makin, 1994), and computer simulations (Mak, 1994). In these projects it is either the interaction with the technology itself or the potential of the technology to facilitate interactions that is seen to be supportive of autonomy.

Since the establishment of learner autonomy research, a number of misconceptions have occurred. Benson (2001) summarized these misunderstandings in two points. First, learner autonomy is not the same as self-instruction as the latter often fails to provide successful results. Second, learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher yields all his/her authority to the students.

A major influence on learner autonomy is the work of Vygotsky. The central term in his theory is the *zone of proximal development*, defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85). Benson (2001) summed up the importance of Vygotsky’s theory in

studying learner autonomy by stating the importance of social interaction and collaboration in the learning process, which means using alternative learning environments that are not teacher-centered and that encourage student collaboration and interaction. Thus, external social interaction and internal cognitive interaction become inseparable and mutually influential. This way, the learning environment is broadened and now includes the learner's responsibility for his or her own learning process as well as that of peers.

Autonomy has been described as a *capacity* - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action (Little, 1991). The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts (Little, 1991, p. 4). Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith (1999) listed eight conditions that, when present in the language learning environment in some form and in some amount, seem to support optimal classroom language learning. Not surprisingly, supporting learner autonomy was one of those conditions.

In general, autonomous learners are more highly motivated than non-autonomous learners. In other words, autonomy leads to better, more effective work. The literature has provided evidence that learning autonomy increases motivation and consequently increases learning effectiveness. Knowles (1975), for instance, reported that "there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners) learn things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners). They enter into learning

more purposefully and with great motivation,” (Knowles, 1975, p. 14). In addition, Wang and Peverly (1986) reviewed findings of strategy research (in subjects other than language learning) and concluded that independent or autonomous learners were those who had the capacity for being active and independent in the learning process; they were able to identify goals, formulate their own learning strategies, and monitor their own learning.

The advantages of learner autonomy can be summarized in three points according to Dickinson (1995): learning is more focused, purposeful, and effective; there are no barriers between learning and living; and learners are able to transfer their autonomous behavior to other areas of their lives.

2.8. Conclusion

There is a great need for research that focuses on the relationship between particular forms of practice and the development of autonomy. The most pressing need is for empirical research that will support or undermine the theoretical assumptions on which forms of practice are based (Benson, 2001). There is also a gap in the literature in the areas of students’ self-perception as autonomous learners, the value of online resources as a learning aid for the autonomous learner, and the inherent features in online resources that empower the autonomous language learner. This has led to the author’s interest in examining how online resources are being used in a foreign language program at a major university. The research questions guiding this study are:

- How do college-level learners of Arabic perceive themselves as autonomous learners?
- What is the value of online resources as a learning aid for the autonomous language learner?
- What are the inherent features in online resources that empower the autonomous language learner?

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

3.1. Overview

The theoretical construct examined by this study is autonomy in language learning. However, since this is a very broad area, the focus is on the role of learner autonomy in making use of online resources. The major questions this study attempts to answer include: Is this technology something to encourage because it fosters autonomy in the learner? Is autonomy available when people achieve a certain level of language proficiency?

The population selected for this study is learners of Arabic at a college level (more specifically, second semester students of Arabic at a major university in the southwest). This study aims at finding out to what extent online resources are used as a tool to enhance autonomy in learning Arabic? After introducing the students to those resources and strengthening their skill in using them, can they become more autonomous when learning a foreign language in general and Arabic in particular? In what ways during the second semester of learning Arabic do we see autonomy manifested, facilitated, or encouraged? How can this technology aid in the language learning process? Is this technology capable of promoting autonomy?

If autonomy is indeed fostered through using online resources, a potential conclusion would be to argue for all students to come in with a certain level of technological skills in order to take full advantage of the online resources available to

them. We would probably anticipate autonomy to be enhanced through this technology, but does it occur in other behaviors such as keeping a diary, talking to self, etc.? To explore that, data sources in addition to interviews were used, namely journals and documents.

3.2. Sampling

The sampling procedure used in this study falls under the label purposeful sampling. In this strategy, particular settings, persons, or events are selected intentionally to provide important data that cannot be obtained otherwise (Stake, 1995). Thus the Arabic teacher and students who use online resources in their classes represent the purposeful sample of this research study that examines the development of autonomy in the learners due to their use of this technology.

The goal achieved by this purposeful sampling is to capture the heterogeneity in the study's population in order to "ensure that the conclusions adequately represent the entire range of variation" (ibid., p. 71). In addition, the participants had to meet certain criteria in order to qualify for this study. Accordingly, the participants' gender, heritage, and computer literacy varied to ensure diversity. The participants in this study were two male and three female students.¹ Two of the three female participants had Arabic as a heritage language, whereas the rest of them were non-heritage students. As for computer literacy, their levels ranged from average to advanced. Selecting the sample was done by giving a class of seventeen second-

¹ Originally, there were three male participants, but one of them decided not to continue participating in the study. Accordingly, he was dropped.

semester Arabic students a survey focusing on the three variables. The survey used is included in Appendix A.

3.3. Participants

The five participants were all students in a second-semester Arabic class taught by an instructor other than the researcher. In addition to the five participants, the class included twelve other students. The brief descriptions of the five participants below are meant to give a background about each person's gender, graduate/undergraduate status, major, Arab/non-Arab heritage, reasons for studying Arabic, experience in learning Arabic, and previous experience in learning other foreign languages. Pseudonyms are used in this study to refer to the participants in order to protect their privacy.

3.3.1. Maya

Maya is a female undergraduate student majoring in natural sciences. She is of an Arab heritage and was born and raised in the United States. Although her parents spoke Arabic sometimes, she did not grow up speaking Arabic at home; rather, she started learning it in college. This is her first year formally studying Arabic which she decided to study for her language requirement because it was her heritage language.

Maya's previous experience with learning foreign languages was with Spanish in high school. However, Maya described that experience as unsuccessful partly

because of a “really bad teacher.” After that frustrating encounter with Spanish, Maya decided not to study it in college again.

3.3.2. Stuart

Stuart is a male graduate physics student not of an Arab heritage. This was his first year studying Arabic. Having always been interested in Middle Eastern history, culture, and politics in general and Arabic in particular, he decided that the more he heard Arabic the more he thought it was beautiful and the more eager he became to learn it. In addition, he wanted to learn Arabic partially because it was “something other than physics for a change.” Even though he did not have a foreign language requirement in graduate school, he became interested in studying Arabic after acknowledging that in his undergraduate degrees he did not really learn French after he studied it as his foreign language requirement. He felt disappointed about that. The disappointment actually started in high school when he felt that his teacher did not prepare her students very well.

When Stuart got to college, he felt swamped by so much work that he wanted the foreign language requirement over with as quickly as possible. After he got the requirement out of the way, he felt that he did not have a good command of the French language; he just satisfied what he needed for a degree. When he got to graduate school, somewhere along the way it occurred to him that he should go back and learn another language.

Based on his less than successful experience with learning a foreign language, Stuart would like this new experience of learning Arabic to be totally different. The changes he would like to see start with his dedication. He elaborated on that in his first interview saying,

It's not just something you do on the side. At the same time, I expect to have a teacher that's going to force me to actually speak the language, which my high school teacher didn't do. She really didn't speak it out loud. So maybe I learned to read OK, but I didn't feel comfortable speaking out loud. I didn't feel comfortable understanding what people were speaking to me.

3.3.3. Josephine

Josephine is a female undergraduate government and history major in her first year of studying Arabic. Although not of an Arab heritage, Josephine's experience in first-semester Arabic was very successful. She attributes that success to a combination of her own effort, the teacher, and the textbook, "We had to do homework. We had to study for quizzes. So we had to learn it, but also I had to study on my own to do it and I was interested." She thought that the students learned very slowly, but they needed to and she was surprised by how much she had learned. She is interested in studying Arabic for several reasons. For her university requirements, she wanted a foreign language component different from Spanish, which she studied in high school. She also wanted to take something that would work well if she decided to travel in her areas of interest: history and government. She thought, "It would work well with studying Middle Eastern governments."

3.3.4. Samantha

Samantha is a female, undergraduate, first-year Arabic student majoring in political science. Because she is a Muslim, but not a native Arabic speaker, she is interested in learning Arabic to better fulfill her religious duties since a basic knowledge of Arabic is essential for that purpose. She also selected Arabic as a minor and the foreign language component of her two-year university requirements. After that, she will continue studying Arabic on her own.

When she first started learning Arabic, she felt a little bored because she was familiar with the alphabet and knew how to read Arabic. The rest of the class, however, was moving slowly because there were several non-Arabic speakers who had never seen the language before and were not familiar with the alphabet.

Samantha's previous experience in learning a foreign language was with Spanish for four years in high school. She described it as a good, successful experience to some extent, but she "can't recall a lot of it now. When you're learning a [new] language, you tend to forget the old one."

3.3.5. Dan

Dan is a male graduate student in his first year of studying Arabic. He is majoring in public affairs and is interested in foreign policy. Because he is not of an Arab heritage, he had no background in Arabic at all before he studied it at college level. He believes that studying standard Arabic as well as its regional dialects will have a positive influence on his career. That is a major reason why he is still at the

same level of motivation, if not more, as when he started learning Arabic. He thinks learning Arabic has changed his perspective on learning a foreign language. The last time he had taken a language course was Spanish in high school, but he was not really motivated to learn it. Arabic is the only second language he has attempted to learn and he is much more motivated to learn Arabic than Spanish in high school.

He described his experience in first-semester Arabic as a definitely positive one. He felt that he learned quite a bit saying, “I went from nothing to being able to speak. At the end of the first semester, I felt that I was able to at least communicate some basic conversations.” When asked about rating himself among his classmates, Dan replied, “It’s hard to gauge in the Arabic class because some of the students are native speakers, but from my experience, I’d say I’m in the middle or above among my classmates in terms of my success in learning Arabic.”

3.4. Data collection

Data were collected through interviews and documents such as written journals and class syllabi to ensure the triangulation of data sources. While interviews are useful in capturing the perspectives and opinions of participants, the use of written journals is useful in describing their behaviors, perceptions, and feelings away from the setting. Moreover, documents add the touch of reality to the data in the form of written text that can be dissected in order to find clues that help in answering the research questions. The role of the researcher remains to be how to connect all the dots and make the interpretations out of all the available coded data.

3.4.1. Interviews

After obtaining the relevant consent from the participants, they were interviewed individually at the beginning and end of the semester. The research questions stated earlier were not necessarily reflected in a direct way during the design of the data collection methods. The reason for that is that much of the data came from the interaction between the researcher and the participants during interviews. The situation in which the data was collected shaped some of the questions asked and observations made. Nonetheless, the interviews were semi-structured, consisting of pre-written major questions as well as additional questions asked during the interviews. The following is a sample of the pre-written questions for the first interview:

Questions about online resources:

- How do you use online resources to learn Arabic?
- What are the websites that you visit for learning Arabic? How often do you visit them? What tasks do you perform while visiting those websites?
- Do you search for websites that help you learn Arabic on your own? How?
- How often do you go to the links available on the Arabic website dedicated to your class?
- Do you go to a search engine and try to find similar websites? Elaborate.

Autonomy-specific questions:

- Do you prefer to learn individually or in a group and why?
- In your history as a learner, what is your experience in learning without an instructor?
- Do you use learning plans? Elaborate.
- Do you initiate exchanges in Arabic with your colleagues and instructor? Elaborate.
- Do you participate in classroom decisions? How?
- Do you reflect upon your learning? How?
- How organized are you as a learner?
- How self-directed are you as a learner?

Autonomy-online resources questions:

- How has using online resources empowered you as a unique language learner?

The second set of interviews with the participants was conducted at the end of the semester. The questions at that stage inquired about to what extent using online resources had helped the participants become more autonomous. The major questions in the second interview included:

- How far has the class taken you? How are you going to continue on your own afterwards?

- Does this technology help you take control over your language learning process and as a result become a better learner? Have you become more autonomous?
- Are you going to be a life-long learner of Arabic?
- Have you developed other skills that will encourage you to learn any other content area?
- Does using this technology have a long-term effect on you as a learner?
- When using online resources, do you feel empowered, free, and in control?

Teacher interview questions

As the researcher was not the participants' instructor, he needed to obtain their teacher's perspective on the research topic. Thus, mid-way through the course, a semi-structured interview was carried out with the students' instructor to explore how he introduced and supported use of online resources, his reactions, and what he felt he would gain from transferring some control over to the learners. Some of the questions asked included:

- What did you envision when you first designed the website? What did you want to include in it?
- What links did you choose to include on the website and why?
- In general, did the students follow your instructions?
- Did you feel that some students were more controlling and manipulative than others?

- Did you feel a difference in the students' performance?
- What do you think about yielding some of your power to the students?
- Do you feel that online resources have helped the students take control over their language learning process? Elaborate.
- How much freedom do you give your students to ask questions?
- Do you use any kind of technique to lower the students' anxiety?
- What do you do to encourage your students when they achieve a goal and progress?

3.4.2. Documents

The second source of data was some documents that were examined. The documents included the class syllabus and assignment sheets to examine the types of tasks the participants were asked to perform and how they related to this study's scope; participants' journals to see how the participants reflected on their learning experience, as well as Web activity logs and lists of the participants' favorite websites for their foreign language learning to keep track of how often they visited certain online resources and how they used them.

3.5. Data analysis

The main focus of this study was on the development of autonomy in foreign language learners who use online resources as part of their program. Therefore,

one important goal of the data analysis process was to find out whether some of the participants could be characterized as autonomous learners. Autonomy can be described in terms of observable features of control. In order to judge whether learners have become more autonomous and have obtained more control of their learning, we need to see whether they are able to produce more effective learning plans, participate more in decision-making processes, reflect more deeply on their learning, and so on. For this reason, and through the data sources, we needed to look for instances of autonomy from two perspectives: the learner's and the teacher's.

All the interviews were transcribed and all the documents were coded manually. By using Dickinson (1993) and Benson (2001) as guides, the researcher looked for evidence in the data that supported the categories of analysis from those two sources. During the process of data analysis, some procedures were used to compare and contrast interpretations, develop unforeseen findings and interpretations, and explore findings that were anomalous. Such procedures included tabulating the frequency of events, information arrays, and flow charts (Freebody, 2003).

3.6. Research questions

Since the goal of a case study is to create an inquiry in which researchers examine particular instances of educational practice (ibid.), the research questions have been phrased to reflect that goal: How do college-level learners of Arabic perceive themselves as autonomous learners? What is the value of online resources as

a learning aid for the autonomous learner? What are the inherent features in online resources that empower the autonomous language learner?

In order to answer these questions, we need to look at the breakdown of the construct of autonomy as defined by Benson (2001):

Measuring gains in autonomy involves identifying behaviors associated with control and judging the extent to which learners display them. The following are examples of the kinds of questions that can be asked:

- *Do they initiate exchanges in the target language?*
- *Do they participate in classroom decisions?*
- *Do they reflect upon their learning?*
- *Do learners make and use learning plans? (Benson, 2001, p. 188)*

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, in this descriptive study the theoretical construct of autonomy in language learning is examined with special emphasis on the role of learner autonomy in utilizing online resources when studying one of the less commonly taught languages, namely Arabic. This study further examines whether the participants' behavior changes as a result of exposing them to online resources in their language learning curriculum. Most prominently, this study tries to highlight the ways in which autonomy is demonstrated or facilitated. Thus, the analysis in this chapter is based on the three dimensions that represent the core of this study: autonomy features, online resources, and online resources empowering the autonomous language learner.

4.1. Autonomy features

The categories in this section are based on five characteristics of independent learners identified by Dickinson (1993, pp. 330-31) and on what Benson (2001) labeled *control over learning management*. Thus, the autonomy “model” used in this study consists of Dickinson’s major categories and this study’s author’s perception of how Benson’s description of the autonomous learner’s features might fit under the Dickinson’s categories. This model is represented below under the following labels:

4.1.1. Autonomous learners understand what is being taught, i.e. they have sufficient understanding of language learning to understand the purpose of pedagogical choices.

- Opportunities to participate in classroom decisions (the freedom given to the students by the teacher to make changes in the syllabus, suggest improvements, etc.)
- Individual vs. group study (how the learner negotiates his/her individual needs in a group and how that differs from studying alone)

4.1.2. Autonomous learners are able to formulate their own learning objectives.

- Using learning plans (being organized and focused in approaching language learning)
- Being an organized learner (managing time, using learning aids, etc.)
- Future plans (how the learner intends to continue learning Arabic after leaving class)

4.1.3. Autonomous learners are able to select and make use of appropriate learning strategies.

- Learner strategies: These strategies were suggested by Oxford (1990) to indicate the learner's methods of approaching the learning situation. The strategies found here are metacognitive, social, and affective.
 - Metacognitive strategies:

- Previewing the task (organizing one's approach to it and sequencing the main ideas)
- Attention (how attention is affected when performing a task)
- Checking, verification, and correction (self-monitoring)
- Social strategies:
 - Asking questions (for clarification or correction)
 - Cooperating with others (to verify understanding)
 - Interaction with classmates (initiating conversations and forming study groups)
 - Interaction with the instructor (initiating conversations and making suggestions)
 - Empathizing with others (changing one's attitude toward a foreign culture)
- Affective strategies:
 - Lowering anxiety (by using various relaxation techniques, etc.)
 - Encouraging oneself (by rewards, self-written notes, etc.)
 - Taking emotional temperature (keeping a diary, talking to family and friends, etc.)

4.1.4. Autonomous learners are able to monitor their use of these strategies.

- Becoming more autonomous and taking more control over the learning situation (over the course of learning Arabic)

4.1.5. Autonomous learners are able to self-assess, or monitor their own learning.

- Reflecting on learning (thinking about one's progress, the teaching methods, etc.)
- Giving self-directions (to motivate oneself, keep up with the rest of the students, and set achievable goals)
- Developing learner skills (acquiring new skills or enhancing previous ones in learning foreign languages)

In addition to the five major categories mentioned above, the author attempted to create a profile of the autonomous learner in this study. The profile was a survey-type impression of the participants' perception of themselves as autonomous learners. The participants had to comment on the following statements provided by the researcher:

4.1.6. Profile.

- *I have a genuine desire to learn this particular language.*
- *I am able to step back from what I'm doing and reflect upon it in order to make decisions about what I need to do next.*
- *I am alert to change and able to change in an adaptable, resourceful, and opportunistic way.*
- *I am methodical and disciplined.*

- *I am logical and analytical.*
- *I demonstrate curiosity, openness, and motivation.*
- *I am flexible.*
- *I am interdependent. Other classmates and I depend on each other to make the learning experience more rewarding and more successful.*
- *I am persistent and responsible.*
- *I am creative when it comes to language learning.*
- *I show confidence and have a positive self-concept.*
- *I am independent and self-sufficient.*
- *I have developed information seeking and retrieval skills.*
- *I have developed and used or I can develop and use criteria for evaluating.*
- *I am experienced in learning without an instructor (from a book, website, etc.)*

All the major categories and their extensions as well as the profile are described in detail in the following section.

4.1.1. Autonomous learners understand what is being taught, i.e. they have sufficient understanding of language learning to understand the purpose of pedagogical choices.

- Opportunities to participate in classroom decisions (the freedom given to the students by the teacher to make changes in the syllabus, suggest improvements, etc.).

The subjects gave their opinion about their opportunities to participate in classroom decisions. Four of the five participants said they participated in such decisions, whereas one did not. Mainly, the participants were comfortable making such small decisions as the one described by Josephine who said in her first interview, “There are only a few decisions sometimes to change the syllabus, but usually that would just be on a day-to-day basis. Say, for example, *I couldn’t do this last night; it was really hard. Could we go over it in class today?* We don’t make huge decisions.” On some occasions, the teacher asked the learners to make a choice of what to cover in class and whether he was going too fast. In this regard, Dan wrote, “We usually go through the book and ask about any problems or questions that we have. So we usually talk about verb conjugation or endings or whatever questions we have. He’s very open to going and explaining them right in class so everybody understands.”

- Individual vs. group study.

The five participants were split in this category. Two of them said they preferred working individually, but two others preferred working in groups. The fifth participant did not have a preference. In a foreign language class such as Arabic they preferred to work in small groups consisting of three or four students. This helped them correct each other’s pronunciation and member-check their learning especially

before tests. Maya explained in her first interview, “I prefer to learn in small groups because if you get in bigger groups, you can get conflicting ideas of how to say certain words. If it’s small groups, it’s better because you teach each other.”

Josephine added in her first interview,

In general I prefer to learn on my own. It’s easier for me to read and understand on my own than with a group. But for Arabic specifically I like to be in a study group because I don’t remember everything and it’s easier to explain. It helps me a lot if I teach it to someone else, too. Everybody works together. It’s just the way the class works.

On the other hand, one participant, Dan, declared that he preferred to learn individually. In the first interview he elaborated,

This has always been the case throughout my history as a learner. I don’t know why. I’m able to concentrate more on a specific topic. And when there is a group around, I can’t focus as much as I would like to. Even if there are other speakers or people who know about the topic, I prefer to do it on my own just for the sake of getting it right to my head [rather] than having all these different voices going on too. [However,] when I ‘m in a group, I’m able to negotiate between my own needs and the group’s needs, [even though] we have different levels of understanding [among] the group members. I don’t try to force an agenda when I have a study group; I’m more democratic.

The instructor reported that when the students were divided into groups, some of them became more controlling and manipulative than others. This is where the instructor came in and kept an eye on the groups making sure they were balanced. He assigned a president for each group, a position that rotated among the three members of each group. This way, the performance of most of the students improved because the weak learned from the strong and the strong taught the weak.

By the end of the semester, the instructor felt that this way of dividing the class helped some students be more motivated and productive in class. The students also created friendships and helped each other in and out of class.

The instructor encouraged the students, but did not force them, to speak to him in Arabic. He established a good relationship with the students to the point that they would feel comfortable to talk to him in the foreign language. Through mutual respect and negotiations, the instructor was able to earn the students' trust so they could benefit from his experience. If they insisted on using English, he would try to advise them to say a few things they learned in Arabic such as greetings. In emails he insisted on starting with a greeting in Arabic and ending with "goodbye" in Arabic, too. That established a system with the students every time they sent emails out.

The instructor reported that he actually yielded some of his power to the students; he had them participate in classroom decisions, asking them sometimes to run the class while he acted as a student, "jumping in" occasionally to make corrections. He wanted to build confidence in the students so that they would be able to speak the language.

In the case of Arabic, the instructor felt that online resources had helped the students take control over their language learning process because the resources outside are very poor. According to the instructor, there is a big need for people to build more websites and create materials like the class website, which is not only used at this university, but in other universities as well because they really could not find easily accessible websites like that.

Through this class and learning Arabic, the students have developed the skill of leadership. They were able to stand up and speak, and that helped them in preparing to give a presentation at a conference, for example.

4.1.2. Autonomous learners are able to formulate their own learning objectives.

- Using learning plans

Two of the five participants said they did use learning plans, whereas the other three said they did not. Those who did not said that they did not feel they needed to make learning plans unless they were behind in their schedules or they had to prepare for a project. They did, however, follow the syllabus created by the teacher for the class. Josephine, for example, said in the first interview, “Because in class we have a pretty structured syllabus, so it’s sort of already done for me, but if there is an outside project we have to do, I do sort of structure it on my own. Say if we have to give a speech, I sort of set deadlines for myself.” Dan added in the first interview,

I know that in this week we’re going to study this lesson. I know when the midterms are... when the finals are. On nights when there is homework, I do the homework right after class the day before and usually on days when we don’t have homework I usually look over the drills that we will be going over in class. This is the fast way. I actually have a set schedule.

In addition, two participants cited their low time-management and organization skills as reasons for not having a set learning plan.

- Being an organized learner

In their response to a first-interview question on how they tried to be organized learners, the participants said they wrote notes to themselves, used index cards, managed their time well, and planning in advance. Dan illustrated that further by saying,

In Arabic the homework assignment... that's what we're going to talk about the next day, and it's a building-block learning process. Last semester in the first two weeks I did not do the homework because I was in the graduate school and it reflected badly on me. And then I realized I needed to keep it up, and I showed a lot of improvement over the semester once I started getting into the weekly habit and setting my schedule.

- Future plans

The participants had different plans for their future learning of Arabic. Naturally, the plans depended on each individual's circumstances, but in general they included the intention to visit countries where Arabic is the native language, communicating with any friends or family members who spoke Arabic, and obviously taking more Arabic classes in school. Dan also mentioned that he would have to continue studying Arabic on his own after this class is finished because he was graduating soon and that he would "probably use books and online resources if they're available."

4.1.3. Autonomous learners are able to select and make use of appropriate learning strategies.

- Learner Strategies

The strategies examined in this study are metacognitive, social, and affective. The participants were asked during the second interview to comment on their choice of learning strategies. The results are summarized below.

Metacognitive strategies

➤ Previewing the task (organizing your approach to it and sequencing main ideas)

Four of the participants previewed the task at hand to find out how long it was going to take them, to make a simple plan for approaching the problem, or to prepare for a quiz. Stuart, however, disagreed saying he was a take-it-as-it-comes kind of student.

➤ Attention

The participants said their attention when studying Arabic depended a lot on their mood, how much homework they had, how determined they were to study, as well as on the time (e.g., the day before an assignment was due) and location (e.g., home, the library). Stuart said, “I do sometimes have trouble with attention. My mind wanders at home. I’ll put it this way. When I haven’t studied Arabic for a day or two, I sit down and really get into it. But sometimes, I get overwhelmed.”

The participants also mentioned that their attention level fluctuated depending on how busy they were and whether they were doing a homework assignment. Samantha said, “It goes up and down. Some days I’ll be very focused on the task at hand and other days with so much going on you can’t give it your full attention.” Dan added, “I’m usually focused on [homework assignments] because of the due date and

the points to be taken off if they're late. So I'm usually very attentive when it comes to that."

➤ *Checking, verification, and correction (self-monitoring)*

Four of the five participants said they usually checked for errors after finishing a task such as a homework assignment. Their sources of correction included the textbook and the instructor. The times when they did not verify their answers were when they spent so long a time on each individual item that they felt confident enough not to go back and review the task. Finally, the participants stated that they were more careful on tests and usually reviewed their answers extensively for fear of losing points and because they felt nervous. Josephine explained her strategy in dealing with this aspect by saying,

If I'm having a lot of trouble, I will skip [items] that I'm having trouble with and then go back. And when I'm done, I make sure I was right. I go with my first instinct, and sometimes I'll look through a test once just to see if there are any glaring errors. Unless I have a problem with an entire section [of a test], I don't go back over it a bunch of times.

Social strategies

These social strategies describe actions taken by the learner to control aspects of the learning situation related to others and to self. They also describe the attitude towards language as an object of learning (Benson, 2001).

➤ *Asking questions*

The participants reported that they would ask questions only if they were not sure about something in order to get it clarified or corrected. The person asked could be the instructor or a classmate. Samantha explained why she was sometimes hesitant to

ask questions. She said, “I generally don’t ask questions in class. I consider myself more of a passive learner. I don’t have too much curiosity [about] the background of what I’m learning. I generally take that and accept it.”

The instructor believed that freedom must be given to the students to speak their minds and tell the instructor what they want to know. However, that should be controlled so that nobody takes over the class. The instructor further stated that there were many curious people wanted to know things beyond what was required. Most of the time, the questions asked were on a need-to-know basis. For example, if a student was interested in a rule that would come in third or fourth year, the instructor would nicely tell that student to wait until the proper time.

➤ *Cooperating with others*

All the participants reported that they frequently worked in groups. That was the setup of the class as arranged by the instructor who divided the students into groups of three and reshuffled the groups in the middle of the semester. Some participants, however, made additional arrangements on their own to meet with other students outside of class to study together. Stuart, for example, said, “I’ve been meeting with another student outside of class to check my Arabic. I actually made this arrangement. It was my idea originally. The other student and I are at about the same level. [Her] father is a native speaker. She’s better at memorizing vocabulary, but I’m better at grammar.”

○ *Interaction with classmates*

The participants occasionally initiated conversations in Arabic with each other in class. Three of the five participants said they did initiate such interactions, whereas two said they did not. Outside of class, those interactions consisted of greetings and very basic conversations due to the fact that the students were still in first year. In some instances, however, the participants tried to have longer dialogues. In her first interview Maya clarified, “We tried to branch out in our conversation. We don’t know how we did, but we had fun trying to do it on our own. In other courses it’s memorization and talking about stuff. In Arabic class we’re actually trying to communicate using the language... trying to speak to each other to see if we’re making sense.”

The instructor divided the class at the beginning of the semester into groups of three. The rationale behind this division was that the smaller the group the better because the instructor could give attention to each student. Those groups were reshuffled every month so that the students could work with new classmates every month, get to know each other, and become friends. That would make the learning process easier.

○ *Interaction with the instructor*

Speaking to the instructor in Arabic had a similar pattern to interacting with classmates. The participants did it on a few occasions and it was limited in vocabulary, grammar, and length. Again, three of the five participants said they did initiate such interactions, whereas two said they did not. In addition, the participants

did not make suggestions to the instructor to improve the learning environment because they were happy with the way the class was going. Samantha reiterated the importance of communication between the instructor and students when she said in her first interview, “When you’re learning a new language, if the professor isn’t communicating with all the students, a lot of times students learn at a superficial level.”

➤ *Empathizing with others*

Two of the participants expressed empathy toward the Arab culture as a result of studying the language. Samantha wrote, “I’ve always had more awareness of the Arabic culture than the average person in my class. It has helped a lot because when you learn the language, you learn a lot about culture. It’s all intertwined.” Dan added, “Through studying Arabic, I have developed cultural understanding, especially religion and ways of life.”

Affective strategies

➤ *Lowering anxiety*

Many language learners experience some level of anxiety when learning a foreign language especially when trying to produce speech or writing in that language. All the participants in this study, however, stated that their level of anxiety was not high and that they generally felt comfortable when speaking to the instructor in Arabic. They attributed that to the fact that they often did their best not make errors in speaking or writing understanding, at the same time, that making errors was part of the learning

process. In this regard, Josephine said, “For the most part, I know that I’m not going to be judged or looked down upon if I get something wrong. I do like to be corrected so that I know what I’m doing wrong.” Dan had a somewhat different perspective saying, “I definitely have anxiety when I’m trying to speak. As far as writing, it’s not as intense because we know that we’ll be getting back corrections and it’ll help us out that way. But when you speak, everybody can hear you. It’s not that you’ll get it wrong, but that others in the class will see you get it wrong.” Finally, when asked if they used any relaxation techniques to reduce their level of anxiety, the participants said that they did not need to, but sometimes they read a fun book or left town for a weekend.

Several strategies were used by the instructor to lower the students’ anxiety including private conversations and having fun in class. Some people were intimidated in the beginning. After that, they got used to it.

➤ *Encouraging oneself*

Four participants reported that in general they did not think about ways to encourage themselves such as making positive statements or writing notes to themselves, but they thought that this sounded like a good idea. Samantha elaborated on that point saying, “It’s more of a personal feeling of self-accomplishment. It gives me more motivation to continue progress and the next time to keep up the same level of achievement.” One participant, Dan, however, said that to encourage himself he usually bragged to his friends about his success and rewarded himself with dinner and

a movie. As for the instructor's part, he often complimented the students equally and rewarded them with extra points.

➤ *Taking emotional temperature*

The participants said that they did not keep a language-learning diary as a way to gauge their emotions, but they reported that they talked about their achievement or frustration to their families, friends, and classmates. This was exemplified by Josephine who said, "This happens every single day. You leave class with a bunch of people and you discuss what happened or how you're feeling about the class or what's going on or *Oh, I messed up today... Oh, I don't understand what's going on... Good job.*"

From the instructor's previous experience, the students were not asked to keep a language-learning diary in Arabic. The problem with that in past semesters was that the diary became redundant because the new students did not have many words to express themselves. So the vocabulary and grammar were so limited the students had to repeat the diary over and over again and at the end they got tired of it and did not want to do it anymore. Therefore, the instructor decided not to use it. On the other hand, the instructor believes that a diary about the language-learning experience itself in the student's native language is a very good idea; it gives the instructor feedback about what the students enjoyed or did not enjoy.

4.1.4. Autonomous learners are able to monitor their use of these strategies.

- Becoming more autonomous and taking more control over the learning situation

All the participants remarked that they had become more autonomous over the course of their experience in learning Arabic, taking more control in general over their learning situation. This was due to self-motivation and practice outside class using all the available resources including the class website that offers multimedia rather than plain text as in a book. In this respect, Stuart commented in his second interview, “One thing I liked about the list of words that we had to learn from was that it was up to each person which ten words to remember...whichever words interested you...the ones you most used in your own conversation.”

For his part, the instructor thinks that the autonomous learner is in an authentic relationship with the language he/she is learning and has a genuine desire to learn that language. Many of his students do much outside work by themselves and are really interested in the language; they really want to know as much as possible about the language.

The instructor commented that his students’ need to be in control depended on the level of the student. Some students need some kind of control; they need the instructions and somebody, preferably a native speaker of Arabic, to help them out. On the other hand, the more autonomous students just want the person there to practice with them, not to control them. They want to have full control of the learning process.

4.1.5. Autonomous learners are able to self-assess, or monitor their own learning.

- Reflecting on learning

All the participants said they reflected on their learning; they contemplated the way they learned and the teaching methods used with them especially when they did not understand something and when they had homework. Moreover, they said they should be exerting more effort and investing more time in learning the language. Dan elaborated on that in his first interview saying,

I look at [the teaching methods] from the teacher's perspective instead of the learner's perspective. For example, last semester I took a class where the teacher's teaching wasn't conducive to the environment. So it made the learning environment very difficult and I was very unmotivated in that class as a result.

Josephine, in her first interview, added, “[I think about that] a lot especially if I find myself in class staring at the wall thinking: *this is a waste of my time*. If the professor isn't structured, it's hard because things get off track and it seems like it's not relevant.” In addition, one participant, Maya, had a good understanding of her abilities, enabling her to improve herself. In her first interview she said, “I feel that because I'm strong in a lot of areas, I know where I'm weak, too. So I tell myself where to pick up.”

The teacher's decision-making also had an influence on the learners' way of thinking about the class. Stuart wrote in his journal,

There are a couple of times where I thought the teacher was too hard or was making too big a deal out of something, but there were also times where I thought he was being too lenient on something else. Sometimes I thought the

teacher should do a better job of letting us know earlier when we need to get online to do something. Sometimes it's sort of last minute like the night before and that's after I've already gone home. Then I have to deal with dialup or I have to get up early to be there.

- Giving self-directions

In general, all the participants gave themselves mental directions and guidance when studying Arabic to motivate themselves, remain organized, and stay focused on their learning goals. They thought about what to do next as Josephine said in the first interview, “When I have a plan or an assignment due, I envision like a twenty-four-hour period in which I have to do this and that. I sort of make a list in my head of the steps of what I need to do. It helps me plan out my time and what needs to be done and it'll help me if I skip a step.” In his first interview Dan added,

The only example I can think of is the term paper. It is very self-directed in that it's all up to you picking your assignment and how you want to organize your paper. I think in those cases when I do have a deadline, my organizational skills are much better because I map out what I need to write in this paper and then I go find sources and build upon that throughout the paper. Not if the teacher was directing me. I don't know if I would be as motivated to go forward and find the sources as with on my own.

- Developing learner skills

The participants believed that, as they were learning Arabic, they had been sharpening their language-learning skills (familiarity with the Arabic script, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, especially becoming more sensitive to sound) and developing skills that would help in learning other content areas. Such skills included patience, diligence, taking up a challenge, paying more attention. As to using their skills to try to learn another foreign language, the participants said that they would

rather focus on Arabic at the moment and think about other foreign languages later on in their lives.

Two participants provided interesting perspectives on this point. First, Stuart said, “Now I understand English better because I understand English instinctively not as a set of rules. There were a couple of times when things were pointed out in Arabic and it made me think about English.” Josephine added,

I learned Spanish when I was little and that was easy. Now that I know that you can learn a new language when you're older, I think it'll be interesting but hard. It's hard to keep all the languages straight in my head. If I think not English, I speak not English. So I end up speaking Spanish/Arabic. So adding a third one might make it completely incomprehensible.

4.1.6. Profile

In an attempt to make a conclusion about the participants' profiles as autonomous learners, they were given a set of statements in the second interview and asked to comment on them. The statements are listed below with a summary of the participants' replies.

4.1.6.1. I have a genuine desire to learn this particular language.

All the participants agreed with this statement especially when learning Arabic was significant in their culture or career path. Samantha said, “Arabic plays such a large role in the [Islamic] religion that not understanding the language itself outcasts you a little bit.” Josephine, however, said that her desire to learn the language is not stable. She added, “Sometimes I feel really motivated and excited. And sometimes it's a chore. It depends on [whether] I understand everything. But if

I'm behind, I don't feel a desire to learn. It's pretty bad that it depends on how I'm doing or feeling, but that's the truth."

4.1.6.2. I am able to step back from what I'm doing and reflect upon it in order to make decisions about what I need to do next.

Three of the five participants indicated that they did not pause and think about what they had just learned unless there was a problem and they needed to fix it or there was a new concept and they wanted to have a complete grasp of it. Samantha said, "I just keep going because I feel that my learning is going fine. There is no need to interrupt the flow. I'm pretty satisfied with the progress of the class and how we're being taught."

The instructor said that was true for most his students. They would go back and reflect and ask questions like, "Where did I go wrong? How do I fix things?" From his experience they would talk to him first before approaching other people. They often wanted to learn more or see where the problems were. If the instructor could help them with advice, he would provide it. If not, he would refer them to somebody else.

4.1.6.3. I am alert to change and able to change in an adaptable, resourceful, and opportunistic way.

Two of the five participants were not sure if they had this quality, but they all agreed that any change in the classroom environment or class structure would need time to be established. Samantha explained, "If I notice that my progress isn't going very well and I feel like I'm becoming very laid back, then generally I step up the

progress and start putting more time into it and get myself back on track. I would initiate change.”

The instructor believes that adapting to change depends on the system the students grew up in. Some of them are changeable. For others, the system they grew up in does not help or allow change; it’s just fixed in a sense. The latter type of students need more work on the part of the instructor to make them change and adapt.

4.1.6.4. I am methodical and disciplined.

The participants were split in this category. Two of them did not perceive themselves as methodical and disciplined, whereas two others did. The fifth participant was undecided. From the instructor’s experience, the students were disciplined in this class. For example, they often had their notebooks ready and they seemed organized.

4.1.6.5. I am logical and analytical.

All the participants agreed here. Dan gave a detailed explanation saying, “I analyze previous homework assignments to see what I’m doing wrong and [detect] learning patterns. I try to make sense of a new grammatical structure to see if I can understand it on my own. If it’s complicated, I try to analyze it to see if it resembles something that I previously learned.”

The instructor thinks that his students are logical and analytical. They try to make sense of the grammar. He gave as an example a physics student who thinks of the language as physics and has a scientific way of doing things.

4.1.6.6. I demonstrate curiosity, openness, and motivation.

All the participants possessed these features, albeit in various degrees depending on their course load. The pattern that emerged from the data showed that the lighter the course load the more curious, open, and motivated the student. Samantha had this comment, “I lack in [curiosity] because when I’m learning something my mind does not open up a thousand questions about a certain subject. Generally, what’s given to me I accept. I’m satisfied with how much I’ve learned. I don’t have a need to learn beyond that.” The instructor also agreed that his students, especially the more autonomous ones, had these characteristics.

4.1.6.7. I am flexible.

All five participants perceived themselves as generally flexible. They did not mind if things were changed in class. Dan also added that the flexibility depended, to a degree, on other coursework that might affect the amount of time and effort put into Arabic.

4.1.6.8. I am interdependent. Other classmates and I depend on each other to make the learning experience more rewarding and more successful.

All the participants preferred being independent rather than interdependent, but they also welcomed the collaboration with classmates especially in a language class where communication is key to learning. Josephine offered her insight saying, “I do a lot of stuff on my own. Sometimes we’ll meet in groups and I’m OK with that, but I don’t need that to learn. So if it’s there, it’s like a luxury.” Samantha added, “It makes it more interesting to have your peers with you and watch everyone else’s progress, but as far as depending on them for my own personal learning, no. I’m

generally independent. However, in a language class it's definitely better to have classmates." Finally, Dan said, "I think I depended more on them than they did on me."

4.1.6.9. I am persistent and responsible.

All the participants agreed that they should be more responsible in this class, especially when doing the homework assignments or preparing for a presentation. The instructor, in turn, believes that responsibility is an outcome of being autonomous.

4.1.6.10. I am creative when it comes to language learning.

Four of the five participants did not believe they were creative in this aspect. Dan, however, said that he came up with his own ideas especially in learning vocabulary. He made little cards and quizzed himself and others.

The instructor reported that some students were creative; they would create the groups. They would say, "Ok. Let's go out and meet." or, "Let's record things." Others wanted to rely on somebody else. The students who liked to be more controlled (less autonomous) wanted somebody to control things and tell them what to do. The more autonomous students would say, "We need to do the following."

4.1.6.11. I show confidence and have a positive self-concept.

All the participants believed they had more confidence when they sat quietly in the classroom and were not called upon. When they were asked to speak, their confidence level was lower because they were not sure if what they were saying was correct. Dan, for example, said, "[I'm confident] a little as far as speaking goes. If I'm

not called upon, I think my confidence level is higher because when you speak, you don't know if you're saying it correctly or not." The instructor believed that the students' confidence level depended on their knowledge of the language; it depended on the skills they used.

4.1.6.12. I am independent and self-sufficient.

Every one of the participants agreed with this statement. Dan elaborated, "I usually accomplish half [of my learning] on my own and the other half with the group. I sometimes approach learning the language through my own initiatives."

4.1.6.13. I have developed information seeking and retrieval skills.

The improvement in these skills was remarkable especially when the topic of presentation or project was of interesting to the learners. This was exemplified by better searching for answers to questions faced by the participants as well as looking up words in the dictionary more quickly and accurately. The instructor also noted that most of his students developed such skills. They have told him that they do seek the information they are looking for especially by searching on the Internet.

4.1.6.14. I have developed and used or I can develop and use criteria for evaluating.

The participants used various ways of evaluating themselves in this language class including their confusion level, performance in class, and test grades. Dan gave more details,

I can do my homework assignments and see how the progress is going with them, but in the future I'm planning on developing that. I'm going to work through the rest of the textbook and after that I'll have to talk to a native Arabic speaker or a teacher to see where I need to go next and whether I need to go online or buy a computer program or buy another book.

The instructor remarked that the more autonomous learners do develop and use criteria for evaluating their own progress. But in a group the instructor noticed that the students evaluated each other; it was a group evaluation.

4.1.6.15. I am experienced in learning without an instructor

In talking about their experience in learning without an instructor, the participants said that they had had instructor-based learning throughout their history as learners and that they preferred it that way because they needed guidance, planning, motivation, and confirmation that what they were doing was right. Three participants gave some details about this aspect. First, Stuart said in his initial interview,

Actually I bought a little travelers' book. [This] was even before I made up my mind to take the class. And I actually tried to learn a little bit on my own. It wasn't a very good book, but I learned a couple of things from it. I didn't really have any way of completely [checking my learning] without the class and without having not only an instructor to tell me what I was doing wrong but having something like the Internet or a CD recording to listen over and over again.

Second, Josephine talked about her experience in learning without an instructor saying in the first interview,

It can be fairly successful. But if you just start learning about something, you may not know about all the resources so it helps to have an instructor to provide direction but not necessarily explanation. I learned Spanish without an instructor. I took a correspondence course. That was easy because it was all planned out. It was not an online course. It was a textbook and you had to do certain exercises and mail them in. It was during high school. I did Spanish I by correspondence while I was involved in Spanish II because I had to get my language requirement in high school.

Finally, Dan said in his first interview,

I'm not very task-oriented. If you give me a week to learn something and you put me on my own, the sixth day I'll say how do you do this? It's not a constant process. I need a schedule. I need somebody to let me know. If I had an assignment and a deadline, I'd usually make it. But if, for example, there is no deadline, I'd put it off. If I had the choice to decide between having a traditional instructor I know with the assignments and decisions imposed on me as opposed to me making the initiatives and the decisions, I'd rather have a traditional teacher. Especially when you're just beginning to learn a language, you don't know where you should be at a certain time, and it's much easier for the teacher to guide you. When you're on your own, I don't think you have that guidance.

4.2. Online resources

4.2.1. The class website

4.2.1.1. Describing the class website

The class website is a huge source of information and links related to learning the Arabic language. It is comprised of various sections representing different language skills and other aspects of learning the language. Figure 1 shows the first part of the home page. It has sections on Arab Culture Class, Advanced Media Reading, Arabic Vocabulary, Al Kitaab (the title of the textbook), My Class, Dialect Class, First Year Arabic, Second Year Arabic, Third Year Arabic, Listening, Vocabulary (organized by topic), New Materials, as well as Online Radio and TV Stations (in Arabic).

Arab Culture Class - New	Arabic Vocabulary	Al kitaab	Arabic Vocabulary	My Class- coming soon
Advanced Media reading	First Year Arabic	Second Year Arabic	Third Year Arabic	Dialect Class - Restricted
Listening - more to come	Coming soon the full Quiz Data Base 4 all			Vocabulary - more to come
The Quran				Job application terms
The Quran (Listen)				Jobs and Professions
Arabic Voices				Buying and Selling
Listening Material				Religion related words
BBC (programs)				Water related words
BBC Live (Latest)				Vacation related words
Islamic Museum				Feeling related words
Watch and Listen				University related words
Arabic Stories				Grammar related Terms
Arabic Songs				Geography related words
Arabic Video Clips				Arabic Food
New Material	Song, Lyric and sound - soon			New Material
Arabic dress	<div> <div>Newly Created Material</div> <div> <div>The American constitution</div> <div>Great Listening Site</div> </div> <div> <div>- 2Listen and read</div> <div>- 1Listen and read</div> </div> <div> <div>- AdvancedExpressions?</div> <div>VideosWatch</div> </div> <div> <div>Analyze - Advanced</div> <div>Reading Articles - Advanced</div> </div> <div> <div>- ArabicHuman Rights- 2</div> <div>- ArabicHuman Rights - 1</div> </div> </div>			Verb Conjugation
Marcel- My Mother				Marcel- His Love R
Nouns with "I feel"				Past conjugation
Arabic Names				Small Dictionary
God 99 Names				Human State
Useful words-1				Useful words-2
All Arabic Greetings				Grammar- 2
Grammar- 1				Months- 2
Months- 1	Please Give Credit where credit is due			Numbers- 1
Numbers- 2	Arabic for professionals - New			Colors- 1
Arabic Lexicon	Journalism Terms	Political Terms		Colors- 2
More soon	Law Terms	Cultural Terms		More soon
Mores soon	Military Terms	Psychological Terms		More soon
	Religious Terms - 2	Religious Terms - 1		
	Medical Terms	Address Terms		
Radios	Feel free to use the material for educational purposes ONLY			TV's
Voice of America (Latest)	<div>Great Listening Material</div> <div>Great simple Readings</div>			Aljazeera
Voice of America (programs)				Dubai TV
All Arab Radios (Listen)				Bahrain TV
Arabic Radios				Oman TV
Stories (Listen)				Politics (Clips)
Free Iraq (Listen)	Scroll down to enjoy some Listening Material			Jordanian Arabic (clips)
News Tunis				Jordan TV

Figure 1

Figure 2 shows the middle part of the home page which includes sections on Grammar, Listening, Advanced Reading, Created Materials for Listening, and others.

Grammar topics	Listening	Advanced Readings - Arabic	Others
Grammar	Al Azhar mosque	America and democracy	Flags of the Arab Countries
Arabic Grammar- Advanced	Weather forecast	Democracy in the Arab world	Map of the Arab World
Numerals- 1	About Jordan	Greater Middle East	Meals and Recipes
Tip toed	Abed Alhaleem	Women and Military work	Arabic Food 1
Case Marking	Ibraheem Togan	Freedom of Press	Arabic Food 2
Numbers 1 - 10	The two Koreas	Free Press in America	Arabic Sweets
Numbers 10 - 20	The Eight countries	Arab women and politics	Dictionary from Ajeeb
Numerals - document	American Intellectuals	Arabic summit	Animals' sounds (Arabic)
Question Words	UN Charter	Arab Economy	Folkloric Songs (Arabic)
Arabic Pronouns	Root	Religious dialogue - More Material	The Arab World - Maps
Others	Others	Others	Others
Ten Great Poems (m3allgat)	Arabic Embroidery	Haji in Islam	About Jordan
Arabic Names	Arabic Names	Arabic Names	Money
Arabic Poems	Newspapers- Arabic	Family Tree- Arabic	Proverbs
Arabic Universities	Architecture (museum)	Weather in Arabic	Translate to Arabic
The Bible (Arabic)	Medical terms	Arabic Recipes	Arab singer - Fairuz
The Torah (Arabic)	Names of Colleges	Arabic Magazine	Money- Egypt

Created Material- Listen and Understand - All in Arabic		
Queensland 1 لاند كوينزل	Mokhtalifatan - مختلفان نقشيدي هاني	On the Beach الشاطئ على
Queensland 2 لاند كوينزل	Indian Air الهندية الخطوط	Short Story - The snake القصيدة قصة
Queensland 3 لاند كوينزل	Win..? ربح	Mosque in Kualalambour في مسجد اجمل
Saudi Artist - sa3ad khathir فنان سعودي	Islam الاسلام	Ann Marry ماري ان
Markets in Damascus دمشق اسواق	New York City نيويورك مدينة	The Origin of the Arabs اصل العرب
Toot Drink - measurements عصار الثوت	Michael nuacmah نعيمة - الانسان قيمة	The Turks الاتراك
Artist from - Tunis فنان تونسي	Habits in Mauritania موريتانية عادات	Casablanca الدار البيضاء
Prince William وليام الامير	Weather forecast جوية نشرة	Do You know? تعلم هل
Artist paintings الفن اهل رسم	Nicholas Copernicus كوبرنيكس نيكولاس	Fruits الفاكهة اسماء
Album for an Iraqi Artist عراقي فنان	Arabic Currency العربية العملات	Name of Artists فنانين اسماء
Names of Arab Countries العربية الدول	Najah al masa3eed- Poetry المساعدة نجاح	Garthya Marques ماركيزا جارتيا
Bristol University بريستول جامعة	Baghdad City بغداد مدينة	Blonde hair - UN الشعر
family relations العلاقات	Drive through marriage ماثي عل زواج	Damascus city دمشق مدينة
Butterflies- migration الفراشات هجرة	Short story 2- married woman قصيدة قصة	Hayyat Hotel- Big offer فندق من عرض
Dishes - measurements مقلد - لحم	Jeddah City - Ksa جدة مدينة	Do you know? Harp تعلم هل
Najeeb mahfooth محفوظ نجيب	The Moon Hotel القمر فندق	Malaysia in lines ماليزيا في
a Hot bath for a Turtle ساخن حمام لاسحفاة	Rolex watch - Ad رولكس ساعة	a Newzland woman المرأة نيوزلاند
Loneliness الوحدة	Method of teachings تدريس طرق	The language of the "thad" اللغة
Crossword game in Arabic	Al Berber البربر	Alif Lyla wa Lyla ألف ليلا وا ليلا

Figure 2

Figure 3 shows the bottom part of the home page and it includes Arabic Programs (for teaching Arabic around the world), History & Culture, as well as

technical instructions on how to read and write in Arabic on different computer platforms.

<i>Arabic Programs, History, Culture and Arabic & Technology</i>		
<i>Arabic Programs</i>	<i>History & Culture etc</i>	<i>Technology</i>
Arabic in Amman	Arabic Language Intro (Clip)	Arabic Fonts
Best Arabic program- UT Austin	History of Arabic 1	Type in Arabic
Arabic Language Institute in Fez	History of Arabic 2	Mini - pad to write in Arabic in all systems
CASA program	A is for Arabs	<i>Read ,Write in Arabic: by the webmaster</i>
Arabic in Cairo	Training 4 Arabic	Instructions 1
Arabic in Syria	Arab Culture	Instructions 2
American University in Beirut	Prophet of Islam	Instructions 3: <i>coming soon</i>
Arabic Abroad- 1	MESA Site	Instructions 4: <i>coming soon</i>
Arabic Abroad - 2	Arab Academy	To read Arabic on Mac use I cab
All Summer programs	School Arabia	To Type Arabic on Mac
Yemen Institute for Arabic studies	Arabic Language Research site	Type The Arabic Numerals

Figure 3

The website was created by the same instructor who was teaching the participants in this study during data collection. According to the instructor, the website was designed with autonomy in mind. The intention from the beginning was to help the students become independent, visit as many links as possible, and use the materials available to them on their own.

4.2.1.2. Using the class website

In her second interview, Samantha described her first encounter with the class website saying,

I navigated it to see what's there. It was pretty self-explanatory. There are tons of links all over it. I did read and see all the different links that were on there first before I went to the homework. I found it more interesting than looking through the book and trying to understand the book. In general, this class website has just about everything I could possibly need at this early stage of learning Arabic and it has so many options like listen to different voices that I don't need to look elsewhere.

Samantha's account of experiencing the website for the first time portrays the richness of information available to the site's visitors. In the early stages of learning a foreign language, students need links that are especially useful to them when they are studying on their own. Having many links, especially of the audio and video type, makes the learning experience interesting, engaging, and exciting. The new language learner is often enthusiastic about learning as much as possible about the foreign language and culture.

4.2.1.3. Types of assignments

On the class website there are short videos that go along with the chapters in the textbook. Watching the videos repeatedly and doing the exercises in the book are the two regular activities given by the instructor. In addition, extra vocabulary lists and answers for homework are also available for students at their convenience. In the second interview Josephine said,

Lately we've been using a page that has vocabulary (about forty words) and you have to choose ten. We usually do that for the conversation hour. We get a document or a link to a website that would have a lot of words and you can print it off and have your own copy. You can hear those words repeated and their translation.

Stuart added, “The teacher is having us download a microphone (recording program) where we have to speak all of the new vocabulary and send it to him online. For conversation hours, we have a new link that is mainly with the basics...body parts, colors, food that has all of those vocabulary words.” Samantha also said,

On certain conversation hour days, we’ve had subjects such as weddings and songs and we have a list of vocabulary. If you click on the listening portion, it actually pronounces each one of the words clearly so that you can notice vowel patterns in pronunciation. So we’ve basically obligated to fix our pronunciation.

This way of communication between the instructor and the students enhances the idea of learner independence. The learners are left to work on their own after the initial prompt from the instructor. They are responsible, though, for following the instructions and reporting their work to the instructor.

4.2.1.4. When and how often do the participants visit the website?

The participants’ visit frequency to the class website ranged from once every day to once a week. They all agreed that using it has been incorporated as a routine study habit. They usually visit it to do the listening activities online. However, some of them visit it even when there is no assignment to practice the pronunciation on their own or look at something new that catches their attention. Stuart said, “About half of my weekly visits are for class, but the other visits are for my own personal learning trying to get the vocabulary down.” Dan added, “I usually frequent the class website for homework assignments, vocabulary, and preparation for conversation hours.” One participant noted that she would be using the class website after the

semester is over to refresh her information. Josephine added, “I have a big problem of forgetting everything I learned in just a few weeks. I think that if I can use the website just to keep listening or watching movies or whatever I could do to help me keep up.”

As a rough indicator of learner autonomy and independence, a learner who spends more time using online resources for the sake of improving language skills is believed to be more autonomous and independent than one who does not show as much interest or spend as much time.

4.2.1.5. Extra activities

If the participants had extra time after doing the assignment, sometimes they stayed at the class website for a reason. Dan, for example, said in the first interview,

When I'm finished doing an assignment, I would probably look at the next lesson and see what it contains to prepare myself. The teacher is pretty notorious for calling you out in the middle of the class. So it helps if you have an idea of what's going on. On nights when homework is not due, that's when I usually spend maybe thirty minutes and go around and look at the vocabulary [for] next week.

Spending some time exploring the online resources available even after finishing the homework assignment is a strong sign that the learner is self-motivated, interested, autonomous, and likes to be prepared.

4.2.1.6. Increased usage

Toward the end of the semester, all the participants increased their online usage of the class website. The participants indicated that in their second interview

where Samantha said, “I started using it more because pronunciation has become a greater problem for me. So to work on my pronunciation, it really helps to go listen to the online voice that we have to improve my pronunciation.” Maya added, “Lately I’ve been using it a lot more in the latter part of the semester than in the beginning. I think it’s been really helpful. Before I was less aware of how helpful it was going to be.” Thus, as the semester was winding down, the participants noted that in preparation for final exams and bigger assignments they could make more use of the online resources especially in the area of improving pronunciation.

4.2.1.7. The instructor’s input

The instructor is the class website designer. He wanted to include in it the materials the students needed after class to do their homework and a review of the materials covered in class. He did not want the students to wait for him until the next day. He wanted them to have everything available on the website in advance so they would have a lot of time to practice over and over again without him being there.

On the website there is everything the students receive from the instructor in the lectures including the syllabus, some links the students need to visit, and listening materials recorded by the instructor for them to practice.

The instructor reported that most of the students in his class were already familiar with the computer technology. The problem was that some of them did not want to do the homework and often made up excuses. In general, the students followed the instructor’s instructions whenever he told them to go to the website and

do what they were supposed to do. Many students in the class were very good with computers and loved to go to websites; other students were not really interested even in reading their emails. So the instructor had to use some techniques to make sure that the students actually did access the website. For example, he put a little quiz on the website and requested it back in class the next day. Thus the students were forced to verify their visit to the website.

4.2.2. Other websites

4.2.2.1. Searching for online resources other than the class website

Most participants indicated that they did not try to search for websites similar to the ones suggested on the class website to help them learn Arabic for several reasons. First, if they needed something, it was on that website; they did not need to look for more. Samantha wrote in her journal, “I’ve been very pleased with the teacher. I’m satisfied with that and don’t feel that online resources would help me anymore than the teacher would. I’m content with my pace and I’d rather just be more focused than probably get myself confused.” Second, they lacked familiarity with the Arabic keyboard and the technical knowledge to switch the interface language from English to Arabic. A third reason is that most of the websites are pay sites now; they used to be free, but that has changed recently. Fourth, resources other than electronic ones were available to the participants. Dan said in the first interview, “Before I started studying Arabic and just after I became interested in it, I purchased a book that had some tapes along with it before I started class to try and prepare myself, but I

didn't try to find online resources." Finally, the lack of time was stated as another reason for not searching for additional online resources. In this respect, Dan said in his first interview, "Graduate students... our classes are a lot more labor-intensive than undergrads and require a lot more time. So if I had more time, I would possibly look for another Arabic website."

Two participants, however, have visited sites other than the ones suggested by the class website out of curiosity. Dan, in his first interview, said, "Before I was in the class, I was actually looking at Al-Jazeera on my own just out of curiosity." Maya added in her first interview,

I use a translation site; I got that by myself by going to Google and looking up Arabic English translation. It's the only thing I use apart from the class website. We have extra assignments and we have to relate them to ourselves and if we haven't learned the words I look them up.

4.2.2.2. External links

The participants were further asked about the external links available on the class website. Their various responses included the lack of knowledge that such links existed, visiting them less often recently because there was no need or because they were a little daunting and time-consuming, and visiting them to prepare for a project. Stuart commented on that in the first interview saying, "We end up on a page that's written completely in Arabic and being in second semester I feel like wow! I'm not quite prepared for it."

The types of links visited by the participants included websites about music, country information, extra vocabulary, online dictionaries, BBC Arabic, and Al-

Jazeera. Stuart visited a website full of videos. He described it in the first interview saying, “The videos are on all kinds of topics from politics to women’s issues. I didn’t get much of the videos. I’ll come back later. I would like to visit them if I raise my Arabic level to a certain point.”

The participants indicated that they became more interested in visiting the links suggested by the class website after reaching a certain proficiency level in the language that would allow them to read and understand the contents of those websites. Samantha, in her first interview, elaborated, “When I visit another website, I usually look over it and see what I can understand and what I can’t and see how much you can make out of it but I look a lot.”

The instructor made links on the class websites of everything related to the units in the textbook such as information about a city or a country that they need to find and report back in Arabic. The links also included famous broadcasting Arabic websites such as al-Jazeera and BBC Arabic so the students would have a chance to listen as much as possible to develop their listening skill. Other links were to dictionaries and encyclopedias in Arabic from reliable and very good sources like Ajeeb, which has a translator.

4.2.2.3. Advantages of online resources

Among the advantages of online resources mentioned by the participants were availability and ease of use because all the things needed were in one spot. Maya exemplified that in the second interview by saying, “I know that [they’re] available if

I ever need them. And if I need to refer to anything, it's always at my fingertips. They're a little bit easier to use [than books] because [all] the things we need [are] in one spot."

4.2.2.4. Email and chat in the foreign language

Four of the five participants never tried using Arabic for email or chat, but they said they would like to learn how to do that. The main difficulty they mentioned in that regard was the lack of familiarity with such applications in Arabic and with the Arabic keyboard. Josephine elaborated on that in her journal writing, "It would be hard to chat in Arabic just because it's hard to speak in Arabic for me. I can only talk about a few certain things. I never tried to type using the Arabic keyboard, but in our emails to our teachers we're supposed to use Arabic greetings and endings transliterated in English letters." One participant, however, did try something. Stuart said in the second interview, "Way back actually I got on something called Arab cafe. I was messing around. It was basically [greeting]. Maybe I should go back now that I know more. I didn't use the Arabic alphabet. I was just using transliteration."

4.3. Online resources empowering the autonomous language learner

In this section, the researcher attempts to make the connection between using online resources and being an autonomous learner.

4.3.1. The best part about using online resources to learn Arabic

The participants expressed their appreciation that online resources were available to them as a source of support and motivation in their language class. They especially emphasized the importance of having texts as well as interactive audio and video materials on their class website for them to use at a convenient time and place. In addition, they said that online resources gave them independence from their instructor, who was not accessible at all times, and enabled them to go beyond the scope of the class. Samantha wrote in her journal, “Using online resources helps me take control over my language learning process because you have the option to learn more vocabulary than what’s required of you. If you really do have a passion for learning the language, you can exceed far beyond what’s required in the classroom.”

The participants wrote that if they did not have online resources in their language learning experience, they would be missing the opportunity to interactively practice their language skills, especially speaking and listening, time after time outside of class without the embarrassing feeling of pushing their classmates back. They also said online resources provided information the students would not be able to obtain by any other means. Samantha said in the first interview, “[Online resources] give you so much variety to choose from. It’s definitely a privilege. When you’re studying from a book all the time, it’s boring. But when you go online, you listen to the recording... you watch the video... you feel the interaction.”

The instructor stated that online resources were a very important part of teaching because the students needed accessible materials on the website; they did not

have to be in class or in the library. They could just do everything at home. That cut a lot of email from the students to the instructor because everything was there and the instructions were clear.

4.3.2. The most frustrating part about using online resources to learn Arabic

The participants said that they were most frustrated about the inability to ask questions when online. Dan said in his first interview, “If you have a difficult time understanding a certain word or how a passage goes, no one is there to explain it to you like we have in class. As long as there are clear instructions, I don’t see a problem in it. It’s something more in line with our skill level. I can’t see anything inherently difficult with it. It’s a great tool.” The participants also complained about some technical difficulties such as dealing with slow connections at home, which forced them to use the computers at school working around their schedules, as well as not having the Arabic script installed and having trouble finding something online.

In the instructor’s opinion, the frustration with using online resources resulted from inexperience with using computers. The students needed the know-how to unzip files, save files, etc. A basic knowledge of the computer was required. In order to avoid the technical problems that might arise, the instructor gave the students a technology orientation in the first two lectures.

4.3.3. Comparing the learning situation in the classroom with that online

Comparing the two situations in terms of feelings of empowerment, freedom, and control, the participants reported that online there was potentially more emphasis and repetition than in the classroom. That spared them the embarrassment of asking the teacher to repeat something over and over again and gave them freedom to control what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to learn it. Maya said in her second interview, “Online you have a lot more control over what you need help with or what you need to be emphasizing.”

The participants also said that they definitely felt more empowered by an online resource than in the classroom because they could see their unassisted achievement and work at their own pace, not at the pace the instructor put them on. This way, they could concentrate on the things they found difficulties in and go faster in the things that were easy to them. Conversely, some participants stated that having the instructor available was more conducive to learning, especially for answering their questions promptly and identifying appropriate online materials for their level

In the instructor’s view, the difference lies in the degree of control available to the learner. Unlike class, the learner does not have supervision online. For example, a listening exercise in class is completely different from a listening exercise that the student does on his/her own. In class the student is told, “Listen carefully for certain things.” Outside, the student could do whatever he/she wants.

4.3.4. Improvement in skills during the semester

Two participants agreed that the class has taken them fairly far in improving their Arabic skills, emphasizing grammar, vocabulary, and speaking in the latter part of the semester. The participants felt confident “enough to survive in an Arab country,” as Samantha put it. In contrast, two other participants felt that the progress slowed down toward the end of the semester. Josephine explained that in her journal writing,

We’ve learned more, but as the semester progresses I feel like I’m not learning as much as I did before. At the beginning of the year you’re always caught up, but by the end of the year you get so far behind and you’re always stretching in all of your classes. I feel like I’m stuck on a certain level. We seem to be using the same old grammar. We haven’t learned any new concepts in a while, but we’re practicing the old stuff over and over.

One participant had a neutral position on this aspect. Stuart believed there was no difference between the beginning and end of the semester in terms of the amount of time spent using online resources for learning Arabic or the interest in them.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter includes sections on a summary of the findings, conclusions drawn from the results, the limitations of the study, pedagogical implications, theoretical implications, and suggestions for further research.

5.1. Summary of findings and conclusions

The following is a set of conclusions based on the research questions of this study.

5.1.1. How do college-level learners of Arabic perceive themselves as autonomous learners?

All the participants agreed that they were independent and self-sufficient, but they also welcomed collaboration with classmates especially in a language class where communication was key to learning. The students who liked to be more controlled (less autonomous) wanted somebody to control things and tell them what to do. The more autonomous students would know what they needed to do. These results agree with what Farmer (1994) and Broady (1996) found. In their respective research, Farmer and Broady both concluded that students preferred the presence of a teacher even if they were willing to accept responsibility for their own learning. The results in this study, however, disagreed with Reinders' (2000) findings in one aspect. Whereas Reinders found that the students had "a shallow awareness of what

independent learning entails” (p. 79), the data suggested that the participants in this study showed an understanding of the concept and signs of independence.

In general, the participants perceived themselves as flexible; they did not mind if things were changed in class. The flexibility depended, to a degree, on other coursework that might affect the amount of time and effort put into Arabic. They all agreed that any change in the classroom environment or class structure would need time to be established. The instructor believed that adapting to change depended on the system the students grew up in. According to the instructor, a student who was raised in an educational environment that resisted change would find it harder to adapt to change later on and vice versa.

The features of curiosity, openness, and motivation were possessed by all the participants, albeit in various degrees depending on their course load. A heavy course load meant that the student had less time and energy, and thus was less motivated, to seek answers for questions he or she might have than if that student had a lighter course load. This is in line with Reinders’ (2000) findings that online resources seemed to motivate the students, especially the listening materials because they had high face validity for the students. Most participants believed they were logical and analytical, but they did not perceive themselves as creative.

The participants also agreed that they should be more responsible in this class, especially when doing the homework assignments or preparing for a presentation. Some participants did not perceive themselves as methodical and disciplined, whereas others did.

All the participants believed they had more confidence when they sat quietly in the classroom and were not called upon. When they were asked to speak, their confidence level was lower because they were not sure if what they were saying was correct. The instructor believed that the students' confidence level depended on their knowledge of the language and the skills they used.

As a group, the participants' profile showed that they had a genuine desire to learn Arabic, especially when learning it was significant in their culture or career path. Generally, the participants did not pause and think about what they had just learned unless there was a problem or a new concept. This finding agrees with how Usuki (2002) described her Japanese participants, who did not create opportunities to reflect on their role as learners; they merely followed their teacher's instructions.

The skills of information seeking and retrieval improvement were improved, especially when the topic of presentation or project was of interest to the learners. This was exemplified by better searching for answers to questions faced by the participants as well as looking up words in the dictionary more quickly and accurately. The instructor also noted that most of his students developed such skills especially by searching on the Internet.

The participants used various ways of evaluating themselves in this language class including their confusion level, performance in class, and test grades. The instructor remarked that the more autonomous learners developed and used criteria for evaluating their own progress. But in a group the students evaluated each other by listening to one speaker at a time and then giving feedback on his or her performance.

5.1.2. What is the value of online resources as a learning aid for the autonomous language learner?

The participants expressed their appreciation that online resources were available to them as a source of support and motivation. They highlighted the importance of having texts as well as interactive audio and video materials to use at a convenient time and place. Toward the end of the semester, the participants increased their online usage of the class website. Thus, as the semester was winding down, the participants noted that in preparation for final exams and bigger assignments they could make more use of the online resources especially in the area of improving pronunciation. In addition, online resources gave them independence from their instructor, who was not accessible at all times, and enabled them to go beyond the scope of the class.

According to the participants, if they did not have online resources in their language-learning experience, they would be missing the opportunity to interactively practice their language skills, especially speaking and listening, time after time outside of class without the embarrassing feeling of pushing their classmates back. Online resources also provided information the students would not be able to obtain otherwise.

In terms of feelings of empowerment, freedom, and control, online there was potentially more emphasis and repetition than in the classroom. That spared the participants the embarrassment of asking the teacher to repeat something over and over again and gave them freedom to control what they wanted to learn and how they

wanted to learn it. The participants also felt empowered by online resources because they could see their unassisted achievement and work at their own pace, not at the pace the instructor put them on. This way, they could concentrate on the things they found difficulties in and skip easier things. Conversely, some participants stated that having the instructor available was more conducive to learning, especially for answering their questions promptly and identifying appropriate online materials for their level. In the instructor's view, the difference between the classroom and online environments lies in the degree of control available to the learner. Unlike class, the learner does not have supervision online.

The concept of yielding control, investigated in this study, was examined in a broader perspective by Bruce (1995) who argued that substantive autonomy in the educational context needed more than giving students freedom of choice and action within the curriculum. It needed a wider understanding of all the components that made up the complex relationship between the teacher and learner.

The method of communication used in this class between the instructor and the students enhances the idea of learner independence. The learners are left to work on their own after the initial prompt from the instructor. They are responsible, though, for following the instructions and reporting their work to the instructor.

Independence is an essential part of all types of learning. It is extraordinarily important in an online environment where, according to Sampson (2003), "the student is largely self-directed and unsupervised, and expected to be more autonomous" (p. 104). As a rough indicator of learner autonomy and independence, a learner who

spends more time using online resources for the sake of improving language skills is believed to be more autonomous and independent than one who does not show as much interest or spend as much time. The participants' spending some time exploring the online resources available even after finishing the homework assignment is a strong sign that the learner is self-motivated, interested, autonomous, and likes to be prepared.

5.1.3. What are the inherent features in online resources that empower the autonomous language learner?

In the early stages of learning a foreign language, students need links that are especially useful to them when they are studying on their own. Having many links, especially of the audio and video type, makes the learning experience interesting, engaging, and exciting. The class website is a huge source of information and links related to learning the Arabic language. It is comprised of various sections representing different language skills and other aspects of learning the language. The website, created by the course instructor, was designed with autonomy in mind. The intention from the beginning was to help the students become independent, visit as many links as possible, and use the materials available to them on their own.

The new language learner is often enthusiastic about learning as much as possible about the foreign language and culture. In this respect, there are short videos on the class website that go along with the chapters in the textbook as well as extra vocabulary lists and answers for homework for students to use at their convenience.

Most participants indicated that they did not try to search for websites similar to the ones suggested on the class website to help them learn Arabic for several reasons. First, if they needed something, it was on that website; they did not need to look for more. Second, they lacked familiarity with the Arabic keyboard and the technical knowledge to switch the interface language from English to Arabic. A third reason was that most of the websites had become pay sites; they used to be free, but that has changed recently. Fourth, resources other than electronic ones were available to the participants. Finally, the lack of time was stated as another reason for not searching for additional online resources. Two participants, however, have visited sites other than the ones suggested by the class website out of curiosity.

The types of links visited by the participants included websites about music, country information, extra vocabulary, online dictionaries, radio and television. The participants indicated that they became more interested in visiting the links suggested by the class website after reaching a certain proficiency level in the language that would allow them to read and understand the contents of those websites.

5.1.4. An additional conclusion: Does the fact that Arabic is the foreign language under investigation affect learner autonomy?

Besides the fact that Arabic is one of the less commonly taught languages in the U.S., it is also one of the harder languages to learn because it has grammatical, syntactic, and writing systems that are completely different from those of English. These difficulties combined make any learner of Arabic seem autonomous since that

learner opted to take the time and make an effort to learn a hard, rarely taught language with little resources compared to other commonly taught languages such as Spanish and French. Why, then, would one choose to learn Arabic? The answer lies in Arabic's increasing significance in the world today.

First of all, Arabic is one of the official languages of the United Nations. It is spoken as the native language throughout the Arab World which extends from the Arabian Gulf in the east to the Atlantic Ocean in the west. Arabic is also the language of the Quran, the holy book of Islam, and other Islamic sources such as the tradition of Prophet Mohammed. That makes it also important to non-Arab Muslims all over the world who use Arabic to perform their religious duties. Nowadays, with the news about events in the Middle East broadcast on a regular basis, one can benefit greatly from the knowledge of Arabic to understand what goes on culturally and politically in that vital region of the world.

Second, most ancient civilizations prospered in the Middle East, thus making it an open museum of great artifacts and historic sites. In addition, the Arab World contains the world's largest oil reserves- a fact that might explain why there are so many disputes in the region. Moreover, it is just rich with interesting cultures and warm, hospitable people. For these reasons and the fact that the Arab World is such a rich and diverse culture with people who welcome visitors with open arms, learners of Arabic have the advantage of being able to communicate with the native

inhabitants of the Arab World in the event of visiting their region for tourism or residing there for work or study.

Finally, the third reason that makes any student of Arabic an authentically autonomous learner despite the difficulties is the long list of career options that have opened for Arabic speakers recently. For example, Arabic speakers can work as reporters or translators in the media; fill a number of positions in finance, law, trade, and the oil industry, find jobs as interpreters or intelligence analysts in the government; or work in Academia.

5.2. Limitations of the study

One limitation of this study is that the original design of this study included observing the participants during their online learning sessions. This method of collecting data was later abandoned upon recommendations by the dissertation's committee. The rationale was that interviewing the participants and asking them to keep journals was a better way for exploring the issue and answering the research questions. Because the participants were going to talk and write about their online activity in the interviews and journals anyway, there was no point in observing them actually work on their assignments online. This may have cost the researcher the opportunity to be a participant observer in this study and led to losing on-site interaction.

Another limitation of this study is the fact that it only included two participants whose heritage was related to Arabic. The original design of the

methodology called for three such participants. However, only two could be found in our intact sample. This may weaken any generalization stated, implied, or perceived based on the heritage versus the non-heritage criterion.

Finally, this study relies on self-reporting as the main source of data. Whereas this method of data collection is valuable, especially when studying student perceptions of a certain phenomenon and when observation is not suitable for the study, it still has the risk of having the participants distort their behavior or report it differently, thus decreasing the validity and accuracy of the data.

5.3. Pedagogical implications

By reviewing the findings of this study, it is recommended that in language-teaching programs, pedagogy must make room for and use of technology in general and online resources in particular to facilitate language learning. Including technological innovations, such as the online resources under investigation in this study, in the curriculum should start with the design and proceed all the way through implementation by the end-user (the learner). Reynard (2003) stressed this point by stating that “both the design of instruction and the learning environment itself must provide various levels of communication, interaction, and, in the case of language, learning, practice and production” (p. 5).

Technology, as discussed earlier, has great benefits for the language learner, especially the autonomous type. It provides richly diverse information, individuality, freedom, and control over the learning situation. This gives the already autonomous

learner a more positive learning environment and the less autonomous learner new horizons to explore. This learning situation, however, is influenced by individual socio-cultural experiences which make learners interpret their learning according to the way they perceive the world around them based on their unique history.

While designing and using online resources has become an integral part of language teaching curricula, instructors and students should keep in mind that every person will use and perceive those resources in a different way. In other words, while instructors should give assignments that students are supposed to do, both sides should respect one another's individuality in approaching the learning tasks that involve the use of such resources.

Any online environment should be designed keeping in mind that learning is both individual and social. On the one hand, the individual part involves the learner himself/herself and what he/she brings to the learning situation. On the other hand, the social part pertains to how learners collectively learn from each other by interactively asking and answering questions, giving constructive feedback, and moving higher on the learning curve. Thus any online designer should make the learning environment suitable for such interaction among learners by providing tools for communication for the group and self-access help for the individual. As a result of changing the learning environment, the traditional roles of the student and teacher will be altered; the student will become more independent, free, autonomous, and self-directed, and the teacher, as the moderator, will be less controlling, less demanding, more flexible, and more appreciative of the learner's individuality.

5.4. Theoretical implications

This study has attempted to contribute to the literature in the areas of students' self-perception as autonomous learners, the value of online resources as a learning aid for the autonomous learner, and the inherent features in online resources that empower the autonomous language learner. The following section details the theoretical conclusions drawn from this study based on the findings.

First, in the area of students' self-perception as autonomous learners, those who have this characteristic are independent and self-sufficient, but are also open to collaboration with classmates. This is in line with Usuki (2002) that autonomous learners seek interaction with other classmates. In addition, they perceive themselves as confident (especially when not in the spotlight), flexible, curious, open, motivated, logical, and analytical; but at the same time believe that the degree of such features depends on other factors such as additional coursework that might affect the amount of time and effort put into learning a foreign language. Moreover, autonomous learners, in general, believe they should improve their performance in the areas of creativity and responsibility, especially when doing the homework assignments or preparing for a presentation. Finally, as the results have showed, not all autonomous learners perceive themselves as methodical and disciplined.

As for the area of learner traits, the autonomous learner's profile shows characteristics that are particular to a learning situation. For example, autonomous learners have a genuine desire to learn a foreign language, especially when learning it is significant in their culture or career path. Additionally, autonomous learners, in

general, do not pause and think about what learn unless there is a problem or a new concept. Furthermore, the improvement in the skills of information seeking and retrieval can be substantial, especially when the topic of presentation or project is of interest to the learners. Finally, autonomous learners are capable of evaluating themselves when learning a foreign language. In this regard, they use such ways as their confusion level, performance in class, and test grades.

Second, autonomous learners value online resources as a learning aid, particularly in the early stages of learning a foreign language, when they are studying on their own. For instance, online resources are a source of support and motivation. As for the content of materials, this technology is great for texts as well as interactive audio and video materials to use at a convenient time and place. In addition, online resources give autonomous learners independence from their instructor, who is not accessible at all times, and enable them to go beyond the scope of the class. In terms of feelings of empowerment, freedom, and control, online there is potentially more emphasis and repetition than in the classroom. That protects autonomous learners from the embarrassment of asking the teacher to repeat something and gives them freedom to control what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. Autonomous learners also feel empowered by online resources because they can see their unassisted achievement and work at their own pace, not at the pace the instructor puts them on.

Third, there are inherent features in online resources that empower autonomous learners. For example, having many links on a website, especially of the

audio and video type, makes the learning experience interesting, engaging, and exciting. Toward the end of a language course, autonomous learners usually increase their online usage in preparation for final exams and bigger assignments.

5.5. Suggestions for further research

More quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methodology studies should be conducted on using online resources in teaching foreign languages. One of the topics those studies should focus on is how teachers can best integrate online resources in their foreign language course curricula. It seems that most instructors prefer to use online resources as another teaching and learning aid available to teachers and students rather than a teaching methodological framework per se. This reality should be investigated further to widen the possibility of integrating more of this technology in the pedagogy since it is very appealing to learners and flexible enough to fit in any instructor's style.

Another issue within the field of computer-assisted language learning is the investigation of whether web-based learning or software-based learning is more beneficial to both students and teachers. In web-based learning all or most of the teaching materials are available online, as is the case in this study. On the other hand, software-based learning relies on using a certain computer program to utilize the materials without being connected to the Internet. Researchers who choose to investigate this area should take into consideration the unique circumstances, logistics, environment, and resources of each case study and how the administration

and instructors of a language-teaching program rank their priorities and view their pedagogical position when using such technologies.

Having virtual learning communities is another topic worth more attention. The importance of this issue was emphasized by Kowch and Schwier (1997). They contended that many students nowadays are already computer literate and participate in informal online communities. As a result, they should be given the opportunity to engage in distance learning making use of online resources.

Finally, since this study examined the participants' perception of themselves as autonomous learners, future researchers are recommended to study how instructors perceive themselves and their students as users of online resources. Many colleges and universities worldwide already require their students and faculty to use computer resources in their programs of study. It will be very insightful to study how both parties view such requirements and how the instructors, particularly, are applying what they learn about using technology in the classroom.

APPENDIX A

COMPUTER LITERACY SURVEY

You are being asked to participate in a short questionnaire related to a research study. The Principal Investigator (the person in charge of this research) will also describe this study to you and answer all of your questions. Please read the information below and ask questions about anything you don't understand before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary and you can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Title of Research Study:

Fostering autonomy in learning foreign languages on the World Wide Web

Principal Investigator:

Anwar Hobrom, doctoral candidate

Faculty Adviser:

Elaine Horwitz, PhD

Paul Resta, PhD

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is your email address? _____
2. What is your sex? Male Female
3. Is Arabic one of your heritage languages? Yes No

The following questions concern your use of computers in general and not just your use with respect to your Arabic class.

4. Do you have a computer at home? Yes No
5. Do you own a laptop? Yes No
6. Do you have your own website? Yes No
7. What is the operating system you are most familiar with? (Circle)
- Windows 95 Windows 98 Windows XP Mac
- Other
8. How many hours per week do you spend on the computer? _____
9. How many hours per week do you access the Internet? _____
10. Which search engine do you use? Google Yahoo Other
11. Where do you use a computer? (Circle all that apply)
- On campus at work at home other
12. On a scale of 0 to 10 with zero being very uncomfortable and ten being very comfortable, how comfortable would you say you are with using the computer for school projects and research? _____
13. Do you follow the latest trends in computer technology? Yes No
14. How do you rate yourself in terms of your level of technology use?
- Beginner Intermediate Advanced
15. How many classes where the use of computers was important to your experience in the course did you take last semester? _____
16. How many of your classes last semester required you to use a computer outside of the regular class meeting time? _____

17. How many of your classes last semester had web pages that included class material or required you to use the Internet? _____

18. Have you used online resources in the study of a foreign language? Yes No

19. How would you describe your previous language learning experiences?

Very successful Successful OK Unsuccessful Very unsuccessful

End of survey. Thank you very much for your participation.

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT AND INSTRUCTOR INTERVIEW

QUESTIONS

Major questions in the participant first interview

- How do you use online resources to learn Arabic?
- What are the websites that you visit for learning Arabic? How often do you visit them? What tasks do you perform while visiting those websites?
- Do you search for websites that help you learn Arabic on your own? How?
- How often do you go to the links available on the Arabic website dedicated to your class?
- Do you go to a search engine and try to find similar websites? Elaborate.
- Do you prefer to learn individually or in a group and why?
- In your history as a learner, what is your experience in learning without an instructor?
- Do you use learning plans? Elaborate.
- Do you initiate exchanges in Arabic with your colleagues and instructor? Elaborate.
- Do you participate in classroom decisions? How?
- Do you reflect upon your learning? How?

- How organized are you as a learner?
- How self-directed are you as a learner?
- How has using online resources empowered you as a unique language learner?

Major questions in the participant second interview

- How far has the class taken you? How are you going to continue on your own afterwards?
- Does this technology help you take control over your language learning process and as a result become a better learner? Have you become more autonomous?
- Are you going to be a life-long learner of Arabic?
- Have you developed other skills that will encourage you to learn any other content area?
- Does using this technology have a long-term effect on you as a learner?
- When using online resources, do you feel empowered, free, and in control?

Major questions in the instructor interview

- What did you envision when you first designed the website? What did you want to include in it?
- What links did you choose to include on the website and why?

- In general, did the students follow your instructions?
- Did you feel that some students were more controlling and manipulative than others?
- Did you feel a difference in the students' performance?
- What do you think about yielding some of your power to the students?
- Do you feel that online resources have helped the students take control over their language learning process? Elaborate.
- How much freedom do you give your students to ask questions?
- Do you use any kind of technique to lower the students' anxiety?
- What do you do to encourage your students when they achieve a goal and progress?

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VITA

Anwar Ibrahim Hobrom was born in Gurayat, Saudi Arabia in 1970. His parents are Ibrahim M. Hobrom and Aminah A. Abdullatif. He is married to Rawan A. Chaaban and they have three beautiful sons: Abdullah, Tareq, and Ibrahim.

Anwar had his elementary through high school education in his hometown, Gurayat, Saudi Arabia. After that, he moved to Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, where he obtained his undergraduate degree in Translation from King Saud University in 1991. In 1996 he got his Master's degree in Applied Linguistics at the University of Kansas.

Anwar has held several positions with one employer, the Institute of Public Administration in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. These positions were: interpreter, EFL instructor, and director of the English Language Center.

Anwar's research interests include computer-assisted language learning, translation, early childhood bilingualism, English for specific purposes, and autonomy in language learning.

Anwar's permanent address is:

P.O. Box 205

Riyadh 11141, Saudi Arabia

E-mail: anwar_hobrom@yahoo.com